


# BLACK BEARS

## – Questions and Answers



**I**N RESEARCHING THIS ARTICLE, I contacted the North American Bear Centre, located in Ely, Minnesota, for the most up to date information about black bears. Lynn Rogers, Ph.D. and his grad assistant, Sue Mansfield, were extremely helpful in providing material and editing advice. They were quick to reinforce what I believed; that black bears are more afraid of people than we are of them. By taking commonsense precautions, bears and humans can co-exist together as we enjoy the wilderness.

Another source of information was Gino Ferri, Ph.D. You may recall Dr. Ferri's survival articles in past issues. With almost 40 years of experience in the wilderness, he too believes that staying calm, and knowing what to do, are the only tools every person needs when venturing into the wilderness.

It's important to provide Scouting youth with the correct information. They will be our leaders of tomorrow as they enjoy and protect the wilderness.  
– Susan Muehlherr, Editor, *Leader Magazine*.

Photos: North American Bear Center / [www.bear.org](http://www.bear.org)

# Understanding Black Bears

by Lynn L. Rogers, Ph.D.

*The main thing that helped me get over my fear of bears was learning their language — learning to interpret bear bluster in terms of their fear rather than my fear — learning that behaviors I thought were threatening were really expressions of their own apprehension.*

– Lynn L. Rogers, Ph.D., 2007

## Harmless Bluster

We see bluster when bears are nervous and crowded but reluctant to leave because of cubs, food, or being cornered. Bluster is how bears talk about situations without fighting or retreating. If bluster fails, bears generally retreat. We usually give these bears space, out of respect, but find them easy to chase away if needed.

Bluster commonly involves a pounce toward a person or another bear, a slap to the ground or an object, and a blow. Less commonly, a bear rushes (bluff-charges) towards a person. The rush is a series of pounces, slamming the feet down with each pounce, and generally stops 10 – 20 feet away.

Clacking the jaws is a sign of fear. I used to think clacking (also called jaw-popping or chomping) was a threat. Then I saw a distant bear almost fall out of a tree, grab on quick, and clack its jaws. No one was around for the bear to threaten. Clacking simply meant the bear was afraid, which helped explain why, “*Bears that clack, do not attack.*”

Another sound black bears use in tense situations is huffing. Bears huff when tension eases, just as a person might take a deep breath after being frightened. Retreating bears often huff when they feel safe enough to stop running. Treed bears often huff when they decide it is safe to descend.

A bear can be blustery one second and calm the next. Bluster may help relieve tension. Bluster simply expresses the emotion of the moment and does not mean a bear is getting ready to attack.

## What Do I Do if I See a Black Bear?

The standard answer nationwide is, “Speak calmly and back away slowly.” This identifies you as a person, shows that you are non-threatening, and gives the bear space.

Is following that advice necessary to avoid an attack? No. Those are polite respectful actions that help ease the bear’s anxiety. More aggressive action would likely increase a black bear’s anxiety and send it running.

Which action is safest? If a black bear is more than a few yards away, it hardly matters. Attacks are extremely rare despite what people do.

## Will a Black Bear Sense I’m afraid and Attack?

No. Most people ARE afraid near bears and are not attacked. Black bears are not looking for a vulnerable person to attack. Their first concern is that THEY might be attacked.

Black bears may have the same worries people do about appearing afraid and vulnerable. That might be why they become blustery when they are nervous.

In reality, only rare individuals attack. Only about one black bear in a million becomes a predator. For the rest, attacks are difficult to provoke. We have not heard of anyone being attacked because he or she was afraid.

## What if a Black Bear Ignores Me and Doesn’t Run Away?

Some black bears have learned to trust people who behave predictably in expected locations. These bears expect to see nonaggressive people in campgrounds or residential areas. These bears are not impudent, brazen, or testing their dominance. As long as their world is predictable, they can go about finding food without needlessly running from non-threatening people. Nevertheless,



they assess the demeanor of anyone who comes close — just as they do with other bears — and are alert to aggressive behavior. These same bears generally run from people they see in unexpected places.

If one of these trusting bears is seeking food you need for your camping trip, make it feel unwelcome. We have never seen a black bear we couldn't chase away by yelling, waving our arms, and moving towards it. *Waving and popping a big black plastic garbage bag while advancing toward a bear is doubly terrifying.* For the ultimate in terrifying black bears, get your group together with everyone waving a garbage bag. Ely researchers have never seen a black bear that did not immediately run from a stampede, and no black bear or grizzly has ever attacked a group of six or more. Of course, mild pepper spray is easier than any of the above.

Black bears that are accustomed to people are not more likely to attack or kill. Statistics show that where black bears are most accustomed to seeing people, they are least likely to kill someone.

### What if I Get Between a Black Bear Mother and Her Cubs?

One of the biggest misconceptions about black bears is that mothers are likely to attack people in defense of cubs. That is a grizzly bear trait. There is no record of a black bear killing anyone in defense of cubs.

When humans confront black bear families in the woods, the bears almost always retreat or climb trees. If the cubs climb trees and the mother remains nearby, the mother may show bluster. This makes her appear ferocious, but it simply means she is nervous.

### What if I Want to Watch a Black Bear?

Seeing a wild black bear, especially a mother with cubs, is a rare opportunity. Seeing a bear before it detects you is a chance to learn more about bears.

When researchers spot unaware bears, they stand quietly so the bear doesn't hear rustling leaves and clothing. When the bear detects you, it may run away. A bear's greatest fear is strange bears. Speaking can help the bear identify you as human.

Watching is fascinating. A bear's gentle power, timid nature, and human-like actions are not what most people expect.

— Lynn Rogers, Ph.D. is the Executive Director of the North American Bear Centre and has studied black bears for 40 years. Visit [www.bear.org](http://www.bear.org) for more information about black bears.

## Black Bear Encounters

by Gino Ferri, Ph.D.

**A**S A WILDERNESS SURVIVAL instructor with close to forty years experience in this chosen field, one question invariably and constantly comes up for discussion: What does one do if confronted by a bear? Due to the nature of our outdoor courses, my clients and I are in the bush during all seasons of the year. As a result, we've had our share of encounters with black bears. To date, we've seen twenty-two of these

majestic creatures. Of these, nineteen were black flashes of fur scrambling to get away from us; one took his time as he rooted through a berry patch and ambled away; another, sniffed the air when he saw us, stopped, bellowed loudly, then suddenly darted into the undergrowth; only once did a bear sniff outside our winter shelters looking for food. Considering he was only a few metres away, and not in any rush to leave our

sheltered area, this was indeed a close encounter. On this one incident, I'm delighted that all participants did exactly as they were instructed when confronted by a bear.

For your information, my outdoor expertise is restricted to Central and Northern Ontario regions. As such, I cannot (and will not) comment on Polar, Brown or Grizzly Bear behaviour, since the bulk of my research is confined to the Black Bear, *Ursus ameri-*



*canus*. The reaction patterns of large, omnivorous bears differ widely, and should not be confused. As an example, female grizzlies staunchly defend their young against any intruder. Black bears, on the other hand, are prone to abandoning their young when faced with intimidating predators or humans.

It's ironic that although we now have access to a wealth of research data and resulting published literature on this topic, old die-hard beliefs, misconceptions, and downright falsehoods pertaining to black bears continue to surface.

### Dispelling the Myths

Let's look at a couple of examples (remember: I'm dealing only with black bears).

*Myth:* Since black bears have short front legs, they have a great deal of difficulty running downhill.

This is false: bears, being agile creatures, are quite capable of running up and down hills.

*Myth:* If you see a black bear, climb the nearest tree, where you'll be safe.

The animal will probably laugh uncontrollably at this gesture, thus giving you enough time to run away. Blacks are excellent climbers; if they wanted to, they'd be up and down a tree while you're still at ground level. When beech and oak trees are concerned, they routinely climb them to get at the nuts. We've seen bear pug marks in trees twenty metres high.

*Myth:* Black bears can't swim and don't like the water.

Wrong! They are strong swimmers who thoroughly enjoy themselves in streams and lakes.

*Myth:* Black bears who are about to attack stand on their hind legs.

The reason a bear rears up is to sniff the air and to see what's up front. Being curious by nature, the bear does this to gain a better picture of what lies ahead.

### Tips to Avoid Seeing a Black Bear

By following these commonsense, clean camping and hiking tips, the odds are you won't see a black bear.

- 🐻 Talk or sing when on the trail.
- 🐻 Stay clear of known feeding areas such as large berry patches.
- 🐻 Don't keep any food, toothpaste, soap etc. in your tent. Put it in your food bag.
- 🐻 Keep your area clean; hang leftover foodscraps in your food bag.
- 🐻 Hang food bags in trees, away from your tents.
- 🐻 If scaling fish or gutting game, do so downwind and away from the campsite.
- 🐻 Don't allow food odors to permeate your clothing; it's best to sleep in different garments than those worn while cooking. These should be washed with unscented soaps as soon as possible.
- 🐻 Under no circumstances should you willfully feed bears, any bears.
- 🐻 If walking at night, use a flashlight. Since bears are active at night, the sight of a flashlight may warn them to stay clear.

🐻 Never run from a startled black bear. Keep calm; speak calmly and back away slowly.

If traveling in a remote region and you find yourself face to face with an unprovoked, mature male black bear bent on silently attacking you, especially during daylight hours, a predatory attack is imminent. The recommended reaction is to fight back with everything available to you. Kick, scream, yell, bite, punch, strike with anything available. Recorded cases indicate that black bears are not fully aware of their ability to kill humans and predatory attacks have been stopped when victims struck back.

There is always the opportunity to meet a wild animal when we are visiting their territory. By learning as much about them as we can, hopefully each encounter will be a moment to remember. X

– G. F. Ferri, Ph.D., Director,  
*Survival in the Bush, Inc.*

[www.survivalinthebushinc.com](http://www.survivalinthebushinc.com)

### Wildlife Photography Tips

Wildlife that doesn't feel threatened will continue to go about their normal wildlife ways. Learn how to stop and remain still until the wildlife considers you safe. Large animals are big, so they can be photographed from a farther distance away. By learning the "safe" distance to any animal, you will frighten less animals away. Always keep safety in mind when positioning yourself for that perfect picture. Watch for more photography tips in the August/September 2008 issue.

