

# Are Black Bears Dangerous?

While they tend to be less aggressive than other bear species,  
attacks still happen<sup>1</sup>

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Although fatal black bear attacks are generally rare, especially when compared to other bear species, they are still wild animals and can be extremely dangerous. Many researchers believe that the apparent increase in reported bear attacks is directly related to an increase in outdoor recreation, human populations, and development.

In most cases, black bears are relatively shy, only acting aggressively as a last resort. Nevertheless, the most effective way to avoid a bear attack is by preventing encounters in the first place. Just because black bears can be less dangerous than other large carnivores doesn't mean fatal attacks don't happen. Education on proper outdoor etiquette in wild bear habitats during work or play can help reduce the risk.

Between 2000 and 2017, people in Alaska were 27 times more likely to be hospitalized for a bicycle accident and 71 times more likely to be hospitalized for an ATV or snow machine accident than from a bear attack. A total of 82% of bear-related hospital visits ended in discharges home, and 46% of victims were employed in outdoor industries such as rangers or guides. A majority (96%) of attacks involved brown bears, while just 4% involved black bears.

## Normal Bear Behavior

Black bears are accomplished climbers, runners, and even swimmers, and they tend to be solitary creatures outside of their regular mating season. They also have a powerful sense of smell, a trait that sometimes leads to accidents when humans leave food in accessible areas. If a black bear finds a food source without any perceived threats, they're more likely to come back for more.

"Nuisance bears," or bears that have become less fearful of humans, can accumulate in areas adjacent to wild habitats. Often, subadult males who are still learning how to find their own food without their mother's help come across trash in someone's yard or dumpster, associating the area with easy food rather than human territory. When bears are more accustomed to people, there are more opportunities for human-wildlife conflict.

While the black bear was previously grouped with more aggressive species like brown bears, experts say that they're actually comparatively timid. According to Dr. Lynn Rogers, founder of the North American Bear Center, grizzlies are over 20 times more dangerous than black bears, who display aggression when they're nervous, and the 750,000 black bears who live in North America kill less than one human per year on average.<sup>2</sup>

The expert also hypothesized that black bears are actually more timid because they evolved alongside now-extinct predators like saber-toothed cats and dire wolves. "Black bears were the only one of these that could climb trees, so black bears survived by staying near trees and developing the attitude: run first and ask questions later. The timid ones passed on their genes to create the black bear of today," wrote Dr. Rogers. Most attacks are defensive reactions to humans who get too close.<sup>3</sup>

## When Are Black Bears More Aggressive?

A team led by University of Calgary professor Dr. Stephen Herrero, author of "Bear Attacks: Their Causes and Avoidance," studied fatal attacks by black bears on people in America from 1900 to 2009.<sup>2</sup> Published in 2011, the paper found that a total of 63 people were killed in 59 incidents throughout the 48 lower states, Alaska, and Canada, 88% of which involved a bear exhibiting predatory behavior. Interestingly enough, the study reflected both biological and behavioral differences between males and females; 92% of fatal black bear attacks were predatory and involved a single, lone male bear, indicating that females protecting cubs may not be the most dangerous type of black bear.

Most fatal attacks also took place during August, when black bears are in search of high-energy foods in preparation for hibernation. However, August is also a popular time of year for hikers and outdoor enthusiasts, which leads to a higher chance of human-bear interactions.

"Each year, millions of interactions between people and black bears occur without any injury to a person, although by 2 years of age most black bears have the physical capacity to kill a person," the study says. "Although the risk of a black bear fatally attacking a person is low, it does exist." Findings suggest that, since most fatal black bear attacks occur when bears hunt humans as a source of food, people can learn to recognize predatory behavior in bears in order to mitigate incidents.

A 2018 study comparing black bear attacks to other wild carnivore attacks in urban areas found that black bears typically attacked in areas with less development.<sup>4</sup> Once the sun goes down, black bears are more likely to attack in darker areas than coyotes. Additionally, most of the victims of black bear attacks in North America were alone at the time of attack, whereas coyotes are more likely to attack both unaccompanied people and people in groups. It is also important to note that where other carnivores like coyotes have become more habituated to the presence of humans, black bears in urban habitats tend to change their activity to avoid humans; even in wilder habitats, most black bears are diurnal, only adapting to night time activity to avoid people or other bears. In addition, 66% of attacks were directly related to the presence of dogs, suggesting humans were not the first target.

Black bear attacks on humans are often overplayed by the media, even though thousands of interactions between people and large carnivores occur with no human

injuries or fatalities. As populations increase and more visitors enter black bear habitat, the chance of an attack grows.

Another team led by a researcher for the Spanish Council for Scientific Research showed that increasing black bear and other large carnivore attacks can be explained by the increasing number of people involved in outdoor activities. They studied 700 attacks over the course of 1955 and 2016 in North America; black bears were responsible for 12.2% of attacks, the second lowest for species studied (the lowest were wolves, who were responsible for 6.7% of attacks).<sup>5</sup> Between the years 2005 and 2014, there were about 10 black bear attacks in the United States — among the hundreds of millions of visitors who ventured into protected natural areas.

“Risky human behavior” was involved in nearly half of the documented attacks; the five most common behaviors at the time of attack are: leaving children unattended, walking a dog off-leash, searching for a wounded animal while hunting, engaging in outdoor activities at night or twilight, and approaching females with cubs.

## What to Do if You See a Bear

The National Park Service (NPS) urges that, while bear attacks are rare in national parks, visitors should follow proper viewing etiquette to avoid encounters altogether.<sup>6</sup> These include keeping your distance, paying attention to surroundings, and making yourself noticeable to avoid accidentally sneaking up on a bear in the wild. Never put yourself between a female and her cubs, since they are more likely to attack if they see you as a threat to their young. They also suggest bringing along an EPA approved bear repellent pepper spray, especially while exploring the backcountry and traveling or hiking in groups.

If you do encounter a bear, identify yourself by talking calmly so the bear can separate you from a prey animal, stay calm, and pick up small children right away. Make yourself look larger, don't allow the bear access to your food, and don't drop your pack. If a bear is sitting still, move away slowly and sideways, and don't run or attempt to climb a tree (again, black bears are fast runners and excellent climbers). Lastly, find a way to leave or detour the area. If you can't get away, wait until the bear moves — be sure to leave an escape route open so it can leave first.

Most importantly, know the difference between brown/grizzly bear attacks and black bear attacks, as the defense strategy is different for each species; in the case of black bears, do not play dead. According to the NPS, with black bear attacks, humans should attempt to escape to a secure place like a car or building. If escape isn't possible and as a last resort, they suggest trying to fight back by concentrating kicks and blows to the animal's face and muzzle.

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