



Safety in Bear Country Society

Script of the Video

POLAR BEARS: A GUIDE TO SAFETY

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Introduction

To the Inuit it's "Nanuq" to the Northern Cree "Wapusk". By whatever name, the polar bear is known around the world as the powerful monarch of the North. Majestic and wild, beautiful yet potentially dangerous, polar bears embody the spirit of the Arctic. For thousands of years people have shared the northern landscape with this bear often hunting the same animals for food. Their relationship with the polar bear is one of appreciation and respect, a high regard passed on through generations by the Elders.

Inuit Elder:

"Polar bears are precious. But we must know that if we don't interact with them properly, it is dangerous. We must know the consequences and dangers of meeting them and knowing they can be beneficial to our lives."

What we know about polar bears today reflects the age-old wisdom of northern people and the contributions of modern science. By learning about polar bears by understanding where they go and what they do and by taking simple precautions you can reduce your chances of encountering a bear. By being prepared you can respond appropriately if you do meet a bear.

Polar Bears: A Guide to Safety

Polar Bear Biology

For a cumbersome-looking creature that can weigh up to 800 kilograms polar bears are remarkably agile. They can easily outpace the fastest human scrambling over rough terrain with ease. Polar bears are expert swimmers and divers. Their huge front feet propel them through the water with relative ease. They can often be found swimming far from land or ice. Their remarkable sense of smell can lead them to food many kilometres away and their eyes and ears are perfectly suited to their environment. With such finely tuned senses, polar bears can be active at any time. However, much of their hunting and travelling is done in the evening and at night.

Polar bears are intelligent animals that continue to learn throughout their lives. Their natural curiosity excellent memory and formidable hunting skills provide them with the tools they need to survive. Unlike other bears a polar bear's diet is mainly other animals. Its life is intertwined

with that of its primary prey, ringed and bearded seals, but polar bears will eat any food that gives them the energy they need to survive periods of scarcity in a harsh environment.

Polar Bear Distribution

Polar bears are found throughout the ice-covered seas of the circumpolar Arctic as far south as James Bay. Although sometimes they move far inland polar bears are actually marine mammals. In fact their Latin name, *Ursus maritimus*, means “sea bear”. Their preferred habitat is wherever there is ice suitable for catching seals. Where wind and ocean currents create pressure ridges cracks or leads, seals can find breathing holes and polar bears can find seals.

Seasonal Distribution

The bears prefer to remain on the sea ice whenever they can, moving with its formation and melting retreat throughout the year. Most bears spend the cold, dark days of winter roaming the ice in search of food. Pregnant females however have other priorities in winter. They move onto land to dig maternity dens inland from the coast. People in the Arctic may encounter polar bears in any season and need to be careful all year round. Unlike other bears there is no time when all polar bears are in winter dens. While many retreat temporarily to a den to conserve energy or escape stormy weather it’s only the pregnant females who disappear for most of the winter.

In spring after months of hunting on shifting and broken ice, many bears move to areas along the coast where the ice is more stable. Here, seals give birth and rear their young. Mothers with new cubs emerge from their dens and head out onto the ice to hunt seals. Around this same time mother bears with older offspring shift gears from raising young to finding mates. They send their offspring out to make their own way in the world. These young bears can travel widely and their curiosity and lack of experience may lead them close to humans.

As sea ice breaks up through spring and summer, the polar bears frozen habitat starts to disappear. They devote themselves to serious hunting, the pressure is on. They must pack on enough fat to carry them through the lean periods ahead. Polar bears stay on the ice close to the seals as long as they can. With the increasing open water some bears retreat northward with drifting pack ice while others seek out the last remaining ice in sheltered bays and inlets.

When the ice eventually disappears these bears are forced onto land where they consume whatever food they can find. Usually its slim pickings, but they’re well adapted to their feast or famine existence and are experts at conserving energy. In autumn, as days shorten and temperatures drop, the bears move to where the ocean freezes earliest, the calm water of fiords and large bays or where rivers empty into the sea. As soon as the ice is thick enough to support them they move back onto it to hunt, completing their annual cycle.

Preventing Encounters

Today more and more people are living and travelling in the domain of the polar bear. In some places, warmer temperatures are changing ice dynamics forcing bears to spend more time on land. As a result the number of interactions between bears and humans is on the rise. Most of these encounters are harmless. Occasionally, however a person is injured or even killed. The ice-free season is when most interactions between bears and people occur, but at any time of year the best way to stay safe is to be well prepared.

Inuit Elder:

“As human beings, and as Inuit, we know that the polar bears are ferocious creatures. But we must know that polar bears are also able to think and are very similar to human beings. A person must not get too scared or get panicked at the sight of a polar bear. The polar bear is only protecting itself, but humans have to protect themselves as well.”

This respect that northern people have for bears is based not on fear but on understanding. Passed on through the generations, this knowledge has allowed them to co-exist with polar bears for thousands of years. Learning how to avoid encounters with polar bears is important. Learn about the area you plan to visit by seeking knowledge from local people. Elders, polar bear hunters, or parks and wildlife officials can give advice on where bears are likely to be and what areas to avoid.

Inuit Elder:

“When you go out on the land you have to remember what was told to you and what you were taught. You have to survive with your knowledge. Even if you won’t be gone for long, you have to bring all that you need to survive. You must always be prepared.”

It’s always best to see a bear before it detects you, so stay vigilant and aware of your surroundings at all times. Remember, you need to be careful all year round. When annual ice covers arctic waters bears will be found near ice bergs pressure ridges or open water like a floe edge or lead. These are the bears’ favourite hunting spots. Be extra cautious when traveling near the coast in spring. Remember, this is the time females and cubs are emerging from dens and other bears are hunting seal pups on stable ice. On land, the most common place to encounter bears is along their travel routes beaches peninsulas near shore islands or valley passes. Bears can also approach from the sea. Drifting in on pieces of ice they can turn up unexpectedly anywhere on shore.

The same camouflage that helps polar bears survive in a world of ice and snow makes them difficult for people to see. Be especially careful in areas where bears can be hidden from sight. Make noise to alert bears to your presence. Being aware of wind direction is important. Downwind a bear can sense you much further away. When they become aware of a human approaching, bears usually move away to avoid an encounter.

Watch for signs indicating that bears have been around. If you find a carcass, stay away. A bear could be near by and might think you’re taking its meal. When possible, travel in a group. A bear can see several people more easily than one and a group can be more intimidating. Rest in open areas with a good view of the surrounding country. Take the opportunity to look for bears. Whether your camp is a single tent or a large industrial installation, the potential problems and solutions are the same.

Inuit Elder:

”If you’re going to camp where there are polar bears around, you must not camp at a point of land stretching to the water. Polar bears use the edge of the land to go from one place to another. Polar bears usually hang around icebergs and even pieces of ice or objects that have been washed up along the shore.”

Attractant Management

People and polar bears will sometimes find themselves using the same area. The most important thing you can do to prevent conflicts with bears is to be very careful with anything which could attract them; animal carcasses, human food, and garbage can all cause serious problems. By handling attractants properly you can significantly reduce the risk of tempting a bear into your camp. Fish and wildlife should be processed well away from your camp. To a polar bear a carcass near a tent is like an invitation to dinner. Cook and store your food downwind well away from your sleeping area. If you have to cook and sleep in the same tent, be extra cautious, you may be attracting a bear. Store your garbage well away from your sleeping tent in tightly sealed plastic bags. Better yet keep the bags in a bear-resistant container and take your garbage back to town. Never let bears learn that your animal carcasses, food waste, or garbage are an easy meal. Being careless with attractants will jeopardize your safety and that of others. A bear that receives these food rewards can become dangerous.

Detection

There are a number of methods both traditional and modern that can warn you of an approaching bear. Northern people often use working dogs to detect or deter bears. To be effective, your dog must be close to you at all times on a leash or chained. A simple and effective alarm can be made around camp with noisemakers attached to a rope or wire. More elaborate devices like trip-wire fences and motion detectors are both portable and easy to set up. However, any system can fail. Your best defence is to stay aware of your surroundings and keep a clean camp free of attractants.

Deterrents

Once you detect a polar bear approaching you must respond to it appropriately. There are several tools available that can help you chase a bear away. Bears will often retreat from a series of loud sounds revving a snowmobile or ATV engine often works well. Loud explosive devices can be fired from specialized launchers or 12-gauge shotguns from 25 to 75 meters away. Sometimes a loud noise is not enough to scare away a bear. Non-lethal rounds such as rubber bullets and bean bags fired from a 12 gauge shotgun are designed to inflict pain but not injure the bear. Bear spray might deter a bear at close range, but it has not been adequately tested on polar bears, and the canisters do not work well when cold. A well-maintained electric fence around your camp can also keep polar bears out. It's important to choose devices carefully, know their capabilities and limitations. Don't let them give you a false sense of security. Deter a bear that approaches camp right away and any time it returns. A bear that has found food at a camp in the past may be very difficult to scare away. Eliminating all attractants will make your deterrents more effective.

Encountering a Polar Bear

Even after taking all the best precautions you can still run into a polar bear. Being prepared for the encounter may enable you to make it a harmless meeting. The most common situation is when a bear detects and tries to avoid you. Anytime you see a polar bear at a distance. Stop. Do not approach any closer, stay calm, and assess the situation.

Does the bear know you're there? If the bear appears unaware or seems unconcerned, move away slowly and quietly. Do not run or make motions that might attract its attention. Leave the way you came, keeping your eye on the bear. If it moves in your direction, watch for any change

in its behaviour. On sensing you a bear will often look in your direction or stare right at you trying to determine just what you are. It may stand on its hind legs for a better look or circle downwind to pick up your scent.

If a bear appears interested in you, it's time to change your strategy. It needs to know you're a person not a prey item; help it identify you as human by slowly waving your arms and talking in a low tone. If you can, form a group with others. Ready your deterrent or firearm. Keep your eye on the bear and slowly increase your distance. When possible, move upwind to give the bear your scent. Once it recognizes you as a human, the bear will usually move away. Try to keep track of it as it moves off. Once it has gone, the safest thing to do is leave the area. If you must continue give the bear some time to move farther away, stay alert, make some noise, and proceed with caution.

Polar Bear Approaches and Attacks

On occasion, despite your attempts to avoid it, a polar bear may approach you. When this happens it's important to determine what kind of approach it is making. Inuit elders have identified three main types:

- First, a curious bear may approach simply to see what you are.
- Second, a bear may come at you as a predator, intent on attack.
- And third, a bear that feels threatened may act aggressively to try to scare you away. A bear you've surprised or crowded may perceive you as a threat to itself its cubs or its food.

Being able to recognize each of these behaviours and knowing how to respond is vital.

What should you do if a polar bear approaches? Your best response is always to stop, stay as calm as possible, and quickly assess the situation. Near shelter, get into a safe place. In the open, prepare to use your deterrent. Then decide which type of approach it is making. Is it curious? predatory? or feeling threatened?

Curious Bear

A curious bear may circle downwind or stand on its hind legs to get a better scent. At closer range it may move slowly towards you with frequent stops. Its head and nose will be raised and its ears may be up or to the side as it tries to determine what you are. If the bear appears curious, stand your ground, act confidently, talk to it in a firm voice, and let it know you are human. Group together and use whatever noisemakers you have on hand. Normally the bear will move off once it has identified you as human. If you fail to stand up to it, a bear that is initially just curious or testing may decide you are food and become predatory.

Predatory Bear

A bear showing predatory behaviour does not vocalize or give much warning. Neither does it exhibit signs of stress or fear. Seeing a potential meal, it stays intensely focused on you its ears erect and mouth open. If an approaching bear appears predatory, stand your ground. Talk to it in a firm voice and let it know you are human. The more the bear persists the more aggressive you need to be. Group together and make lots of noise. If you have non-lethal deterrent rounds this is the time to use them. If not you must challenge the bear and make it back down. Arm yourself with whatever is at hand; make yourself look as big as possible. Stay together and continue to act aggressively. If all your aggressive displays and deterrents fail to stop the bear and it charges intent on attack, do not run. Instead fight for your life. Kick, punch, or hit the

bear with anything you can. Focus your attack on its nose and face. If you must shoot an attacking bear, shoot to kill. Wounding a bear can make the situation much worse.

Defensive Bear

A threatened bear will most likely appear agitated or stressed. It may use body language or sounds to try to make you stop or move away. Females often behave this way when defending their cubs. The bear will look directly at you its head lowered it may swing its head from side to side or it might suddenly lay its ears back and take a run at you, stopping short of contact. This is sometimes called a “bluff charge”, but the bear is not bluffing. It’s giving you a strong message to leave it alone. Failing to heed this warning can be extremely dangerous.

If you have accidentally surprised or crowded a bear especially a female with cubs stay calm and slowly move away from the bear. A little distance may be all that it wants. If a threatened bear moves toward you, it will usually stop its advance once you move far enough away, but sometimes the bear may make an aggressive lunge at you. If it does, stand your ground! This may be difficult facing an aggressive bear will be terrifying. If it persists or attacks, respond as you would for a predatory attack, fight for your life and shoot to kill.

Any time a polar bear is killed in defence of human life or property the law requires that local parks or wildlife authorities be notified immediately. In fact, you should contact a parks or wildlife officer after any close encounter.

Review

This program has presented a number of simple and practical steps you can take to greatly reduce your risk from polar bears:

- Arm yourself with knowledge about polar bears, the advice of local people, and the proper equipment.
- By carefully planning when, how, and where you travel, you can prevent most encounters.
- Stay alert for signs of bears and avoid any bears you see and if a bear approaches you determine the nature of the approach and respond using the techniques demonstrated in this program.

Conclusion

Polar bears are magnificent and powerful predators reigning over a vast wild arctic. They inspire admiration and wonder, but their formidable nature can also terrify. The challenge is to find balance in our attitude toward these bears. Not enough respect for their needs can lead to unwanted encounters. Most conflicts between polar bears and people can be prevented. We all share a responsibility to find better ways of living with polar bears.

“The Elders say bears can be dangerous, but don’t be too afraid most won’t bother people. Bears are an important part of Inuit culture, treat them with respect.”

Special Feature “Firearms” on DVD

If you carry a firearm for self-defence be sure it is adequate to kill a polar bear, 30 calibre or larger or a 12-gauge shotgun with rifled slugs. A shotgun has the added benefit of being able to fire noisemakers and non-lethal rounds.

Training and practice are required to use firearms and deterrents effectively. Many deterrents must be shipped as dangerous goods and are difficult to transport. Check the requirements well in advance.

Warning shots are often ineffective. Firearms only make a loud noise at their muzzle. A bear at a distance may not hear much.

Inside your tent, keep bear deterrents and weapons handy. During cold weather, remove oil from firearms and keep them outside the heated part of the tent to prevent condensation and the freezing of moving parts.

If you must shoot an attacking bear, shoot to kill! Wounding a bear can make the situation much worse.