

BEAR SMART

Whistler Visitor's Guide

Prepared by the Get Bear Smart Society

Keeping People Safe and Bears Wild in Whistler



Whistler is located in prime black bear habitat, so whether you're hiking in the Interpretive Forest or strolling through the Village, you may encounter a bear. Seeing a bear can be a memorable experience of your Whistler vacation, but to protect yourself and keep bears wild, it is important to understand how to behave around them. This requires an understanding of bears and their behaviour as well as the role people play in creating conflicts.

While Whistler is home to about 50 black bears, **grizzlies** have also been spotted in the surrounding area. While grizzly bears may respond more aggressively to confrontational situations, black bears are inclined to retreat from conflict.

Before heading into bear country, be sure that you know the difference between a grizzly bear and a black bear. They behave differently. Learn more at: www.bearsmart.com/about-bears/know-the-difference/.

Most black bears in the Whistler area are black with a tan muzzle. However, the name black bear is a bit of a misnomer since black bears can vary in colour from pure black to cinnamon or even blond, and often have a white chest patch. Adult black bears range in size from 50 kg to more than 270 kg (110 lbs to 590 lbs). Females are generally smaller than males.

Black bears prefer forested habitat, but they are constantly on the move in search of the most nutritious, high calorie food and thus travel through many different areas including open spaces and areas occupied by humans. Bears usually spend the winters in dens and are active from mid-March to November. However, some bears may remain active during the winter if they are still finding non-natural foods.

Bears are curious and highly intelligent animals. They are strong and fast! They can run at speeds of 15 metres per second (or 50 ft/sec) - faster than an Olympic sprinter. They smash logs to splinters to access larvae or insect eggs. Many people believe that bears do not have a good sense of sight. This is just one of the many myths that abound. They have good sight, but because their sense of smell is excellent, they rely on it to verify information in the way that humans depend on their vision. Black bears are also excellent swimmers and very agile climbers.

Curbing Conflict

Human food and garbage are very attractive to bears because they are often high in calories and easy to access. A bag full of food garbage is like a buffet laid out for a bear compared to the work of having to pick berries off a bush or catch a salmon. The problem is that conflicts can arise when bears learn to associate people with garbage and other non-natural sources of food. Once a bear has tasted human food, he is likely to return again and again for an easy meal. As bears are



repeatedly rewarded with food treats, they tend to lose their wariness of humans and become willing to go to greater and greater lengths to get that food. In Whistler, bears have been known to break into cars and homes to get food. Sadly, many of these bears end up being killed.

Being Bear Smart

There are many actions you can take to protect yourself and bears:

Never feed a bear, either intentionally or unintentionally. All garbage must be disposed of in bear-proof containers. In Whistler, it's the law! Bear-proof containers are located throughout the village, municipal parks and the valley trail.

Respect bears. Give them plenty of space – 100 m - and never approach them. No one should ever feed, pet or pose for a photo with a bear. Take pictures with a telephoto lens from a distance. Respect trumps selfies! Treat bears the same way you would like to be treated by them.

Be careful when driving. Bears are slow and lumbering animals that are difficult to see at night. It may take a mother with cubs several attempts to get the whole family across a road.

Always be alert and aware. Bears have a keen sense of smell and can detect the aroma of a barbecue or picnic from a considerable distance.



What should I do if I see a black bear?

- Stop and assess the situation.
- Remain calm. Do not approach the bear. In most cases, the bear will flee.
- If the bear is still a distance away, or ignores you, maintain a respectful distance and detour around the bear.
- If you encounter a bear on the roadside, do not get out of your vehicle, not even for a quick photo.

IF YOU SUDDENLY ENCOUNTER A BLACK BEAR AT CLOSE RANGE ...

- Remain CALM.
- Identify yourself as human by talking in a calm tone of voice.
- Back away slowly.

IF A BLACK BEAR APPROACHES ...

- Don't panic! Keep your wits about you. Your brain is your best defence in bear country.
- If you meet a black bear in the woods, or in his territory, talk in a calm and respectful tone of voice to let the bear know you are not threatening (particularly if the bear is defending cubs or a valuable food cache).
- If you encounter a black bear in an urban area or in human territory (and the bear is not in swatting or biting distance), use a loud, firm voice as though you are speaking to a dog that's misbehaving. Say "No!" Repeat as necessary. Remove sunglasses and make direct eye contact with the black bear.

IF A BLACK BEAR TRIES TO INTIMIDATE YOU ...

- Sometimes a bear may try to motivate you to leave, through intimidation – he may “pop” his jaws or swat the ground while huffing. He may lunge toward you or “bluff” charge – run toward you and then suddenly stop and turn away. This can feel very scary. For your safety, slowly retreat to a safe distance keeping your eye on the bear.
- Carry bear spray as a precaution and use it if any bear is persistent in approaching you or attacks.

IF A BLACK BEAR ATTACKS ...

- If a black bear attacks you offensively making full physical contact, fight back with any weapon you can find, including rocks and branches. Do NOT play dead. Use your bear spray.

What do I do if I see a grizzly bear?

That's a different story! Check out our website at www.bearsmart.com/play/bear-encounters/. It's important to know how to react to a grizzly encounter, especially a mother with cubs.

How close is too close?

Bears defend their own "personal space". Just like us, that space varies from one bear to another, and with the situation and circumstances. That distance may be a few metres for one bear or a few hundred metres for another. Once you have entered a bear's personal space, you have forced the bear to act – to either run away or defend his space.

Tracks:



Tips for hiking safely:

Bears are far more likely to enhance your wilderness experience than spoil it! Knowing how to interpret their behaviour and act responsibly is part of the thrill of sharing forests and mountains with these amazing animals.

- Your goal is to avoid surprising a bear. Make your presence known by talking, singing songs, or calling out every once in a while.
- Stay alert. Look ahead on the trail and keep children nearby. Hike during daylight hours.
- Watch for signs of recent bear activity: droppings, tracks, overturned rocks, broken up rotted logs, fresh claw marks on trees, plant root diggings, and fur on tree trunks.
- Be especially alert and make lots of noise when travelling through dense brush, into the wind, near rushing water, or food sources such as berry bushes. Limited vision or hearing may lead to a surprise encounter.
- If you smell or see signs indicating an animal carcass, such as ravens circling overhead, leave the area immediately.
- Travelling on fast moving mountain bikes, skateboards, or in a canoe can lead to a surprise encounter. Be alert!
- Keep all dogs on leash and under control. Dogs can be helpful in detecting bears, but they may also aggravate bears or lead them back to you.
- Hiking in groups on established trails is recommended, particularly in areas outside of town where grizzlies may be present.

Camping in bear country:

When camping in the backcountry, select an appropriate site away from wildlife trails, waterways (such as streams and creeks) and feeding areas, including ripe berry bushes. Do not camp anywhere bear sign is noticed. Use a flashlight at night.

Pack out all garbage, including food scraps. Never bury food. Bears have an excellent sense of smell and will find buried food and dig it up – making you responsible for creating conflicts for other hikers and campers. If you burn food scraps or garbage, be sure to pack out unburned portions.

Reduce the odours that attract bears. Use bear resistant food containers. Cook 100 m away from your tent and do not sleep in the same clothes you wore while cooking. Never take food or toiletries into your tent – even smelly cosmetics and citronella can attract bears. In public campgrounds, store food in the animal-proof containers. If none are available, cache food 100 m away from your tent by suspending it between 2 trees a

minimum of 4 m above the ground and 1 m away from the tree trunk. Tents and coolers are NOT bear-proof. Always use a portable electric fence around your campsite in grizzly country!

Can I view bears safely?

Many of Whistler's black bears spend the summer foraging on Whistler and Blackcomb Mountains. Viewing bears from the gondola or chairlift is the safest way to see them.

When to call the Bear Line

Black bears are generally timid creatures that are tolerant of humans and human activity. If, however, a bear appears to be a threat to human safety or is destroying property, call **604-905-BEAR (2327)**.

For more information on vacationing in bear country or living with bears, e-mail us at info@bearsmart.com or visit us online at www.bearsmart.com.

Have a safe and happy vacation, and remember: Get Bear Smart!

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