

# 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 black 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.

## Black Bears Only

Whistler is not home to grizzlies, only black bears live in the resort area. While grizzly bears tend to respond more aggressively to confrontational situations, black bears are inclined to retreat from conflict.

Most black bears in the Whistler area are black with a brownish 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 only active from mid-March to November. However, some bears in the area have remained active during the last few winters. This unusual behaviour results if these bears are still finding non-natural foods, especially bird seed.

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.

## Creating Problem Bears

Problem bears are not born - they are the product of human indifference and carelessness. 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, it is likely to return again and again for an easy meal. As bears are repeatedly rewarded with food, 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 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 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.

Be careful when driving in and around Whistler. Unfortunately, many bears are hit and injured or killed on roads.

Always be alert and aware in bear country. 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, 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 ...

- Stand your ground and face the bear.
- Identify yourself as human by talking in a calm tone of voice.
- Back away slowly.
- Never run. Although unlikely, it is possible that running could invite pursuit.

## 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 bear in the woods, or in its 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 food cache). If you encounter a bear in an urban area or human territory, 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 bear.
- Sometimes a bear may try to motivate you to leave, through intimidation. It may "pop" its jaws or swat the ground while blowing or snorting. It may lunge toward you or "bluff" charge - run toward you and then suddenly stop and turn away. Although scary, you are not likely to be hurt. For your own safety, stand your ground until the bear turns away and then retreat.
- You can carry bear spray as a precaution and use it if a black bear is persistent in approaching you or 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.

## How close is too close to a bear?

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 its space.

## 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 creatures.*

- 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 can lead to surprise encounters. 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 Whistler 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, even organic 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 for 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.

## Tracks:



## 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](mailto:info@bearsmart.com) or visit us online at [www.bearsmart.com](http://www.bearsmart.com).

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

# BEAR SMART

## Whistler Visitor's Guide



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

*Prepared by the  
Get Bear Smart Society*