The Bear Facts

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Klondike Gold Rush
National Historical Park

Of Bears and Humans

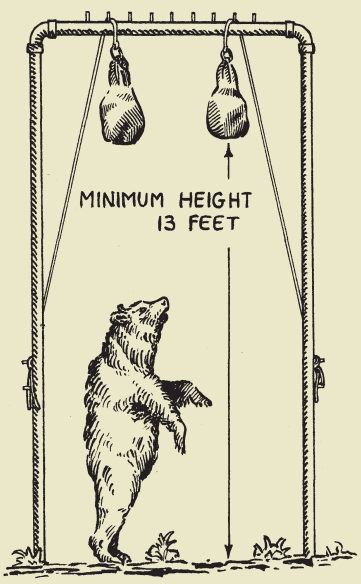
Bears have fed and traveled in Alaska for centuries. Their movements are dictated by ancient connections to the seasons, the fish and their own inclinations. Bears are curious, intelligent and potentially dangerous animals, but when people are unreasonably fearful, both bears and people are endangered. Most bears tend to avoid people. Many bears live in Alaska and many people enjoy the outdoors, but surprisingly few people ever see bears. Even fewer people are ever threatened by a bear.

Chilkoot Trail

Both black and grizzly bears can be seen along the Chilkoot and other area trails. In choosing to hike here, you also choose to risk the possibility of encountering a bear. To reduce your chances of surprising a bear, stay on the trail and in groups. Do not leave your pack unattended at any point along the trail. A quick visual sweep after you are ready to leave camp will help ensure that no garbage, food or personal belongings are left behind for bears. Contact U.S. Park Rangers or Parks Canada Wardens for current bear activity updates and report all bear sightings.

Hiking and Camping in Bear Country

Hike with friends. Larger groups of hikers seldom encounter or surprise bears. Hiking at dawn or dusk may increase your chances of meeting a bear. Also use extra caution in places where hearing or visibility is limited: in brushy areas, near streams, where trails round a bend or on windy days. Be especially alert in berry patches. Talk to your friends when picking berries Bears have extremely good hearing so make a variety of noises (loud talking and singing work well) to alert bears of your presence. Screaming, whistling or whistle-blowing is not recommended because, to a bear, these noises may sound like an animal in pain. If you smell something musky, it may be a bear. If you observe a bear, look for others; females often have cubs with them. Alter your route if you see a bear on or near the trail. Always give bears the right of way.



Camping in bear country is part of the Chilkoot experience. Bears will not normally approach a group around a campfire, but if food or garbage is left out overnight and not hung properly, they may come looking for a snack while campers are sleeping. To avoid encounters, cook away from your tent. Store all food away from your campsite. Pets and their food may also attract bears. Keep a clean camp. Wash your dishes. Avoid smelly food like bacon and smoked fish. Keep food smells off your clothing. Pack out all garbage. Bears have keen noses and are great diggers. Dyea and Chilkoot Trail campgrounds provide bear poles and/or boxes. Hang or properly store all food, garbage, toiletries, and even your stove and fuel at least 13' high on the bear poles to keep them out of reach.

Bear tracks are very distinctive; the hind footprint resembles that of a human. All bears have five toes. The short front foot of a black bear is about 4-7 inches wide. Grizzly paws are up to 10 inches wide with claws twice as long as the toe pads. Claw indentations may be found far in front of the pad print.

Bears use trails just as people do, since it's easier to travel on a trail than through underbrush. They also frequently use bridges rather than swim across a river. Be aware of tracks, droppings, diggings,and other bear signs (claw marks on trees, rotten logs ripped apart and hair on tree bark from rubbing). It's easy to recognize a bear's sizable scat of plant leaves, partly digested berries, seeds, fish bones or animal hair.

Bear temperament is variable. In general, these solitary animals avoid people and other bears. The exceptions to this rule are a female with cubs or a breeding pair. Bears may also feed together at salmon runs, and they may be seen below Finnegan's Point in the fall along the river. Bears have good vision and can see colors, form and movement. In order to gather more information about you, they may stand up on their hind legs to get a better view. They generally rely on their acute sense of smell to locate food and warn them of danger and may stand up to sniff the air.

Bear Encounters

Bears are territorial. If you surprise a bear at close range (less than 200 feet), you may be intruding into its space. Each bear and each encounter is unique; there is no single strategy that will work in all situations. Most bear encounters end without injury, especially if you follow some basic guidelines and remember that your safety depends on your ability to calm the bear.

•**Identify yourself** by talking calmly so the bear knows you are a human and not a prey animal. Remain still; stand your ground but slowly wave your arms. Help the bear recognize you. If a bear cannot tell what you are, it may come closer or stand on its hind legs to get a better look or smell. A standing bear is usually curious, not threatening.

•**Stay calm** and remember that most bears do not want to attack you; they usually just want to be left alone. Bears may bluff their way out of an encounter by charging and then turning away at the last second. Bears may also react defensively by woofing, yawning, salivating, growling, snapping their jaws and laying their ears back. A scream or sudden movement may trigger an attack. Never imitate bear sounds or make a high-pitched squeal.

•**Pick up** small children immediately and stay in a group.

•**Don't drop your pack** as it can provide protection for your back.

•**Do not allow the bear access to your food**. Getting your food will only encourage the bear and make the problem worse for others. If you are carrying bear spray, it should be in an accessible spot on your pack or belt.

•**Back away slowly** if the bear is stationary. Never run, but if the bear follows, stop and hold your ground. Bears can run as fast as a racehorse both uphill and down. Like dogs, they will chase fleeing animals. Do not climb a tree. Despite their claws, both grizzlies and black bears can climb trees.

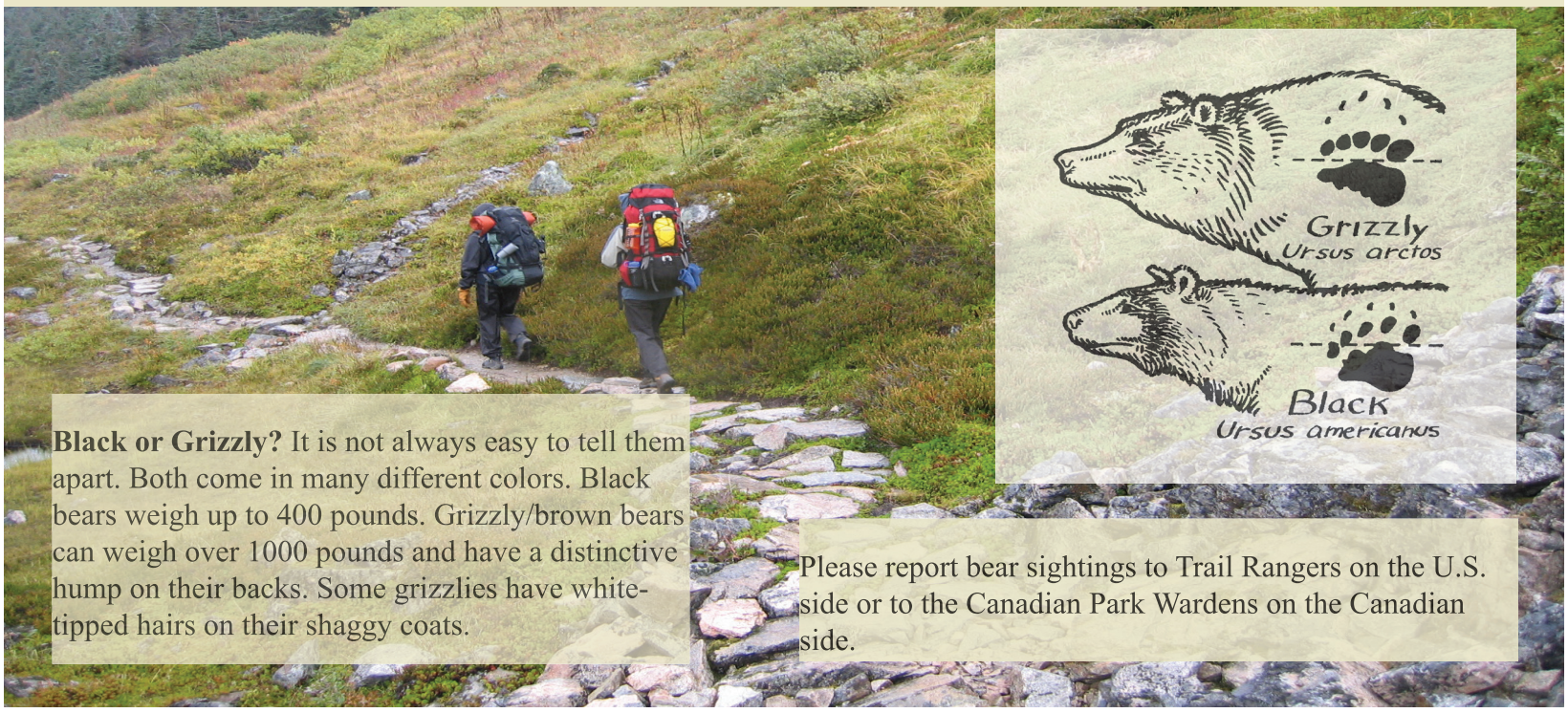
•**Leave the area** or take a detour. If this is impossible, wait until the bear moves away. Always leave the bear an escape route. Be especially cautious if you see a female with cubs; never place yourself between a mother and her cub and never attempt to approach them. The chances of an attack escalate greatly if she perceives you as a danger to her cubs.

Behavioral differences between black and grizzly/brown bears
Both black and grizzly/brown bears can be aggressive, but most attacks occur when a bear is surprised (particularly a mother with cubs or a bear protecting its food). Each situation is unique, so only general guidelines can be offered. You should be able to tell what kind of bear you encounter, as the species of bear determines what your behavior should be.

If you are attacked by a grizzly/brown bear, leave your pack on and PLAY DEAD. Lay flat on your stomach with your hands clasped behind your neck. Spread your legs to make it harder for the bear to turn you over. Remain still until the bear leaves the area. Fighting back usually increases the intensity of such attacks. However, if the bear starts to eat you, the attack has turned predatory and you must fight back vigorously. Use whatever you have at hand to hit the bear in the face.

If you are attacked by a black bear DO NOT PLAY DEAD. Try to escape to a secure place such as a car or building. If escape is not possible, try to fight back using any object available. Concentrate your kicks and blows on the bear's face and muzzle. If you have bear spray, aim directly at the bear's face. Practice and training with bear spray prior to an encounter is advised. Never use bear spray as a repellent; the smell may draw in a curious bear.

If **any** bear attacks you in your tent, or stalks you and then attacks, don't play dead--fight back! This kind of attack is very rare but can be serious because it often means the bear is looking for food and preying on you.



Black or Grizzly? It is not always easy to tell them apart. Both come in many different colors. Black bears weigh up to 400 pounds. Grizzly/brown bears can weigh over 1000 pounds and have a distinctive hump on their backs. Some grizzlies have white-tipped hairs on their shaggy coats.

Please report bear sightings to Trail Rangers on the U.S. side or to the Canadian Park Wardens on the Canadian side.