

CAMPING AND HIKING IN BEAR COUNTRY

There are some things the outdoorsman can do to decrease the chances of having an unintended bear encounter. The first thing that outdoor enthusiast can do is stay in groups of two or more people when hiking. A 1993 study reported that 57% of all injuries sustained by bear encounters were to individuals walking alone in bear country, compared to 29% of injuries to individuals who were walking in pairs. It is also important to limit activities between dusk and dawn. This is the time when most bears are active. Many encounters come as a result of a hiker surprising a bear. Therefore, if an individual has to walk around at night, he or she should use a flashlight to alert any bears in the vicinity. A startled bear is much more dangerous than a bear that is aware of your presence.

Another technique knowledgeable outdoorsmen are aware of is making as much noise as possible when hiking through the backcountry. Talking loudly or periodically shouting out is a good a way of letting your presence be known. Some savvy backpackers even go as far as putting bells on their backpacks or attaching pots and pans to the outside of the packs. These are great suggestions to let the bears know you are there, but are often impractical. Most outdoor enthusiasts are out to see nature, unwind with a quiet hike, view and photograph wildlife, or go hunting or fishing. Making a lot of noise can ruin an outing for other individuals in the area. The individual in bear

country must decide what is more important – communing with nature or coming face-to-face with one of nature’s deadliest animals!

The last thing to remember when hiking is to trust your senses. If you feel something is not right, stop where you are and assess the situation. If you spot a bear, keep your distance. At that point start looking for an escape route and a detour. If something does not look right, retreat. Walk back slowly the way you came. Never run, which usually triggers an attack. Never investigate a foul odor. This could indicate an active kill site where there may be bears present.

When camping in bear country, always keep a clean camp. A bear has a very good sense of smell and is attracted to all odors, good and bad. Never camp near trash cans, garbage dumps, or other campers who are not bear savvy. Cook over a stove instead of a campfire whenever possible. It is easier to contain food in a controlled environment. No food should be allowed to fall on the ground. Food that does fall on the ground needs to be scooped up along with any earth that has the smell on it. It is also very important not to sleep in the clothes that you cooked in.

There should be no items considered a “smell-able” in the tent. Almost everything we take into bear country is a smell-able. All items that smell need to be stored in a bear-proof container, vehicle, or if in the backcountry hung in a bear bag. Most campgrounds in bear country have bear-proof trash cans and bear-proof containers for storing food and smell-able items. Smell-able items include anything edible, toiletries, soap, lip balm, water bottles, and even clothes washed in detergent.

Clothes taken into bear country should be washed at least once without detergent to dilute the smell.

The backcountry provides unique challenges to removing smell-ables from the campsite. In most cases bear bags can be used. Bear bags can be made out of any sack, stuff sack, or canvas bag. Tent bags and sleeping bag stuff sacks can also double as a bear bag. The smell-able items are placed inside. In brown bear country, the bear bag is then tied to a rope thrown over a limb that can be used to hoist the bag at least 15 feet off the ground, 6 feet from the trunk of the tree, and at least 4 feet from the limb it is hung from. This means that the limb chosen to hang the bear from must be at least 16 feet off the ground. If camping in black bear country and one is certain that there are no brown bears present, the bag can be hung a little lower, but the other distances must be adhered to. The bear bags need to be hung at least a hundred yards from the campsite. Everything needs to go in these bags. Multiple bags can be hung to separate items for different uses. It is also a good idea that bear bags be used day and night.

When camping in the backcountry in the very Northern part of North America, hanging a bear bag is not that easy. Once you get above the timberline or are on the tundra, trees are very scarce. In this instance, gather all smell-able items, including food, and take them as far away from camp as possible. Place the items on top of a large boulder if one is available. It is important to remember the need to get smell-able items away from camp when picking a campsite. Campsites should be selected with the concept of bear-proofing in mind.