

Alaska Bear Safety Field Guide

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*Brown bear vs black bear ID, spray deployment technique, camping protocols & what to do if charged
— with Alaska-specific statistics.*

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Alaska is home to an abundance of wildlife, including three species of bears: brown/grizzly bears, black bears, and polar bears. Understanding bear behavior, identification, and safety protocols is crucial for anyone venturing into Alaska's vast wilderness. This comprehensive guide provides essential information to help you navigate bear country with confidence and safety.

1. Alaska Bear Overview

Alaska is home to three species of bears: brown/grizzly bears, black bears, and polar bears. Each species has a distinct range and habitat.

- **Brown/Grizzly Bears:** Found throughout Alaska, including the mainland, islands, and Arctic regions. They inhabit a variety of habitats, from coastal areas to tundras and forests.
- **Black Bears:** Found in the southeastern and south-central regions of Alaska, including the Tongass National Forest and the Kenai Peninsula. They prefer forests, mountains, and coastal areas.
- **Polar Bears:** Found in the Arctic regions of Alaska, including the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and the North Slope. They inhabit sea ice, tundras, and coastal areas.

2. Brown Bear vs Black Bear Identification

Accurate identification of bear species is critical for safety. Here are key characteristics to distinguish between brown bears and black bears:

- **Size:** Brown bears are generally larger than black bears. Adult brown bears can weigh up to 1,500 pounds, while black bears typically weigh up to 500 pounds.
- **Shoulder Hump:** Brown bears have a distinctive hump on their shoulders, just behind the head. Black bears do not have this hump.
- **Claw Length:** Brown bears have longer claws than black bears, with front claws reaching up to 4 inches in length.
- **Face Shape:** Brown bears have a more pronounced Roman nose and a dish-shaped face. Black bears have a straighter profile and a smaller nose.
- **Color Variations:** Brown bears can range in color from light cream to dark brown, while black bears are typically black, but can also be blue-gray or even white (known as Kermode bears).
- **Tracks:** Brown bear tracks are larger than black bear tracks, with front tracks reaching up to 10 inches in length and 6 inches in width. Black bear tracks are typically smaller, with front tracks reaching up to 6 inches in length and 4 inches in width.

3. Bear Behavior & Body Language

Understanding bear behavior and body language is essential for safety. Here are key signs to recognize:

- **Bluff Charge vs Predatory Charge:** A bluff charge is a warning sign, where a bear approaches you with a deliberate, slow pace, often with a loud growl or snort. A predatory charge is a rapid, silent

approach, indicating a bear's intent to attack.

- **Vocalizations:** Bears use various vocalizations to communicate, including growls, snorts, and grunts. A loud, high-pitched growl or snort can indicate a bear's agitation or warning.
- **Stressed vs Curious Behavior:** A stressed bear may display signs of agitation, such as pacing, snorting, or growling. A curious bear may approach you slowly, sniffing and investigating.
- **Signs of a Predatory Stalk:** A bear may exhibit a predatory stalk by following you, often at a distance, and using cover and concealment to approach. This behavior is often accompanied by a lack of vocalizations and a focused, intent gaze.

4. Bear Spray: The Complete Guide

Bear spray is a non-lethal deterrent that can help protect you in the event of a bear encounter. Here are essential guidelines for using bear spray:

- **EPA-Registered Brands:** Only use EPA-registered bear spray brands, which have been tested for effectiveness and safety.
- **Minimum 7.9 oz/1% Capsaicin:** Ensure your bear spray meets the minimum requirements of 7.9 oz (225g) and 1% capsaicin concentration.
- **Holster Carry:** Carry your bear spray in a readily accessible holster, allowing for quick deployment.
- **Safety Clip:** Use the safety clip to prevent accidental discharge.
- **Deployment at 30-60 ft:** Deploy bear spray when a bear is within 30-60 feet (9-18 meters) of you.
- **Wind Direction:** Consider wind direction when deploying bear spray, as it can affect the spray's effectiveness and potentially blow it back towards you.
- **Cross-Contamination:** Avoid cross-contamination by not touching your face or eyes after handling bear spray.

5. Making Noise on the Trail

Making noise while hiking can help alert bears to your presence, reducing the likelihood of a surprise encounter. Here are guidelines for making noise:

- **Bear Bells Effectiveness Debate:** While bear bells can be effective, they are not a substitute for other safety measures. Some bears may become desensitized to the sound, and bells may not be audible in windy or noisy environments.
- **Human Voice is Best:** Using your human voice is the most effective way to make noise, as it is a unique and unfamiliar sound to bears. Call out regularly, especially in areas with low visibility or when approaching blind corners.
- **Calling Out in Brush:** When hiking through dense brush or areas with low visibility, call out regularly to alert bears to your presence.

6. If You Encounter a Bear

If you encounter a bear, follow these essential steps:

- **Don't Run:** Running can trigger a bear's chase instinct, leading to a predatory response.
- **Stand Tall:** Stand upright and maintain eye contact with the bear, as this can help the bear recognize you as a human.
- **Speak Calmly:** Speak in a calm, assertive voice to help the bear understand you are a human and not a threat.
- **Back Away Slowly:** Back away slowly and calmly, while maintaining eye contact, to give the bear a clear path to leave.
- **Group Up:** If you are with a group, stand together to appear larger and more intimidating to the bear.

7. Brown Bear Attack Protocol

If a brown bear attacks, follow these steps:

- **Play Dead:** Lie flat on your stomach with your hands clasped behind your neck and your legs spread apart to resist rolling. This can help the bear lose interest and leave you alone.
- **Face Down:** Keep your face down and protected, as brown bears often target the head and neck.
- **Hands Clasped Behind Neck:** Clasp your hands behind your neck to protect your head and neck from the bear's biting and clawing.
- **Spread Legs:** Spread your legs apart to resist rolling, as brown bears may try to roll you over to access your vital organs.

8. Black Bear Attack Protocol

If a black bear attacks, follow these steps:

- **Fight Back:** Black bears are smaller and more agile than brown bears, and predatory attacks often require active defense. Use any available objects (sticks, rocks, etc.) to defend yourself.
- **Target the Bear's Face and Eyes:** Aim for the bear's face and eyes, as these are sensitive areas that can help deter the bear.

9. Camping With Bears

When camping in bear country, follow these essential guidelines:

- **Bear Canisters vs Hanging:** Use bear canisters or hang food and trash at least 10 feet off the ground and 4 feet out from the trunk, as bears can climb trees. Bear canisters are a safer and more convenient option.
- **Food Storage 200 ft from Camp:** Store food and trash at least 200 feet away from your campsite to avoid attracting bears.
- **Never Cook in Your Tent:** Cook and store food in a designated area, away from your tent, to avoid attracting bears to your campsite.

- **Clean Up Immediately:** Clean up immediately after cooking and eating, and store food and trash properly to avoid attracting bears.

10. Alaska Bear Attack Statistics

According to data from the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G;), there are approximately 10-20 reported bear attacks per year in Alaska, with a fatality rate of about 1-2%. The most common scenarios for bear attacks involve:

- **Surprise Encounters:** Surprise encounters, often due to a lack of noise or awareness, account for the majority of bear attacks.
- **Food Attraction:** Attracting bears to campsites or homes with food or trash is a common cause of bear attacks.
- **Habitat Overlap:** Overlapping habitats, such as hiking or camping in areas with high bear activity, increase the risk of bear encounters and attacks.

By following the guidelines and protocols outlined in this comprehensive guide, you can minimize your risk of a bear encounter and stay safe in Alaska's bear country. Remember to always be aware of your surroundings, make noise while hiking, and carry bear spray as a non-lethal deterrent. In the event of a bear encounter, stay calm and follow the appropriate protocol to ensure a safe and successful outcome.