

Hunting and Bear Safety



Be BearSmart

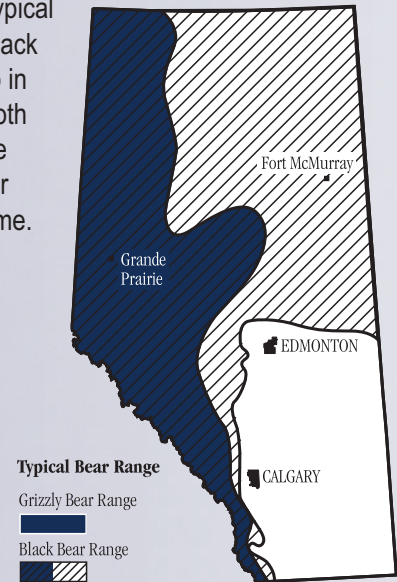
www.bearsmart.alberta.ca

Alberta 
Government

Hunting in bear territory requires extra caution. Being quiet, using animal attractants and calls and travelling alone mean that hunters place themselves at a heightened risk of a bear encounter. In recent years, conflicts between bears and hunters have resulted in maulings in Alberta, including two human fatalities. Self-defence actions by hunters have been the number one cause of death for grizzly bears since 2006. In addition, several grizzly bears have been accidentally killed by hunters that mistook them for black bears. As conservationists, hunters have a responsibility to make every effort to prevent the needless death of a bear. By making efforts to reduce conflicts with bears and by responding appropriately in a bear encounter, hunters can help ensure their own safety while ensuring the conservation of Alberta's bears.



This map shows the typical range of grizzly and black bears in Alberta. Keep in mind, however, that both species of bear can be spotted outside of their typical range at any time.



Understanding Bears

- Bears can consume up to 25,000 calories a day. Bears are continuously driven to locate new food sources.
- Bears have an acute sense of smell, and they rely heavily on that sense to find food and other animals.
- Bears are omnivores, eating both plant and animal food. They are opportunistic feeders that will eat almost anything, from toothpaste to ground squirrels. They will scavenge and seek out all potential new food sources.
- Bears are often interested in petroleum based products, such as fuel, oil, and jerry cans.
- Bears are intelligent. They can learn to gain entrance to containers, vehicles and buildings that smell attractive to them, and they remember these skills.
- Bears are naturally wary of people and are reluctant to come close to humans and places used by humans. However, a bear that has learned to associate food with people will actively search for food or garbage in areas frequented by people.
- All bears have a “personal space” and feel scared or threatened when this space is invaded. How they react to that threat is not always predictable and will depend on the situation at hand and the character of the individual bear.

Bear ID: Grizzly and Black Bears

Know your target before you shoot. If you have any doubt, don't shoot. Shooting a grizzly bear in Alberta carries a maximum fine of \$100,000 and two years in jail.

Grizzly bears can be readily distinguished from black bears based on the length of the claws, the presence of a shoulder hump and the profile of the face. Colour is not a good indication of the bear species, as both species can range in colour from blond to black.

Grizzly Bears:

- have a pronounced shoulder hump.
- may have silver or light-tipped guard hairs on their head, hump and back.
- have ears that are rounded and appear smaller overall.
- have claws that are longer (approximately 7.5 cm to 10 cm long), that often have a light-coloured strip along the top.
- leave tracks with toe pads set in a relatively straight line and claw imprints 5 cm to 7.5 cm in front of the toe pads.



Black Bears:

- have no hump between their shoulders.
- appear more uniform in colour than grizzlies.
- have more pointed and noticeable ears.
- have claws that are usually black and relatively short (approximately 2.5 cm long).
- leave tracks with toe pads that form a noticeable arc, and claw imprints that are often not visible or much closer to the toe pads.



Recognizing Bear Sign

- Fresh signs that indicate recent bear activity:
 - tracks
 - scat
 - overturned logs or dug-up anthills
- Areas where bears could be feeding:
 - berry patches
 - digging sites
 - near animal carcasses
 - grain fields
 - garbage pits
 - bee yards
- Watch for ravens, magpies, crows or jays. These birds could be at a carcass or gut pile that may have also attracted a bear.
- Be extra cautious when:
 - noise levels are high due to running water (near rivers and streams) wind or heavy rain;
 - it's dusk, night or dawn; and
 - sightlines are short because of heavy cover, bends in trails or when approaching hills.



Hunting Safely in Bear Country

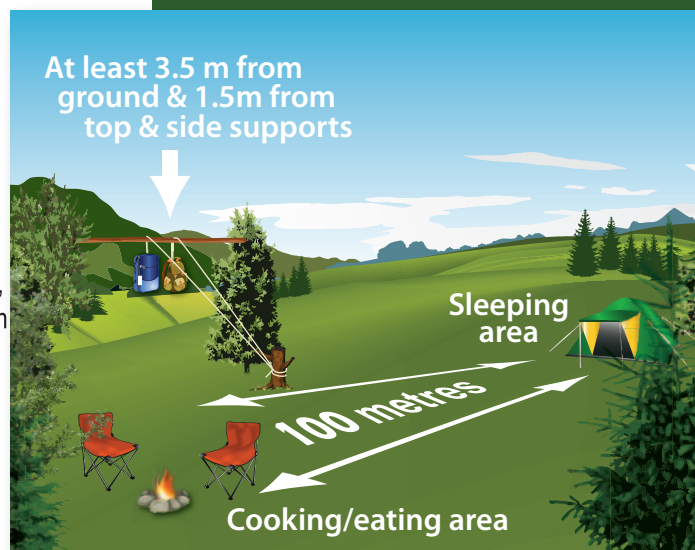
- Carry bear spray and a noisemaker. Keep them on you and know how to use them.
- Remember that animal calls may also attract bears. Distress or mating calls, decoys and cover scents can attract bears as well as game.
- Be cautious when tracking a wounded animal. Bears may also be attracted to animals that are wounded. When possible, have a partner keep watch.
- If you see a bear, leave the area. Don't risk an encounter.

Handling Game Carcasses in the Field

- While field-dressing the carcass, be aware the scent may be attracting a bear. Make noise so nearby bears know you are in the area. If possible, have someone stand watch for bears while you handle the carcass.
- If you need to leave the carcass and return later, separate the carcass from the gut pile. If you can, move the carcass at least 200 metres from the gut pile before you leave. Bears will often be attracted to the gut pile first.
- Hang the carcass. The carcass should be suspended at least 3.5 metres off the ground and 1.5 metres from nearby trees in an area easily seen from a distance.
- When returning to the kill site, use caution. Approach the site from upwind, use binoculars to see if the site is clear and make as much noise as possible.
- If you see a bear at your kill site or if the carcass has been moved or buried, do not approach. Leave the site immediately and advise Fish and Wildlife by calling 310-0000.
- Do not drag the carcass back to camp. Doing so will leave a scent trail a bear can follow directly to where you and your friends are camping.

Keeping a BearSmart Camp

- Choose your campsite wisely. Camp away from wildlife trails, shrubs and berry patches.
- Arrange your camp site safely. Place tents, trailers and vehicles with enough room between them so curious bears have enough room to escape.
- Use airtight containers. Store food and toiletries in secure, airtight containers and keep them at least 100 metres from your sleeping area.
- Store garbage in plastic bags and pack it out.
- Never abandon, bury or partially burn food scraps. Bears have an excellent sense of smell and will be driven to investigate lingering food odours. Burn food scraps completely to ashes.
- Be cautious when moving around the camp at night. Use your flashlight and take your bear spray.
- Use electric fencing. Secure your camp by setting up a perimeter with an electric fence.
- Use dried foods if possible. Dried foods have less odour than fresh foods.
- Always store food out of reach of bears. The best practice is to store food in airtight containers away from sleeping areas. Never store food in a tent or tent-trailer where you are sleeping.
- Hang stored food from a tree. This should be done between two trees or from a tree branch:
 - at least 3.5 metres above ground;
 - at least 1.5 metres from nearby trees or other vertical access features; and
 - at least 100 metres from any tents or sleeping areas.



Store food and toiletries in secure, airtight containers and keep them at least 100 metres from your sleeping area.

- Store harvested animals at least 100 metres away from camp. If you can, hang the carcass from a tree using the same methods for hanging stored food.
- Never cook or eat in or near your tent. Cook a distance away and downwind from your sleeping area. Wash cooking equipment immediately and dispose of dishwater at least 100 metres away from the campsite.



- Store clothes and boots away from camp. Anything that may have blood from harvested animals or odours left from cooking should be stored outside the camp area and never in or around your sleeping area.
- Keep a clean campsite. Ensure you thoroughly clean your campsite, storage sites and equipment before leaving camp. Failure to clean up food scraps, garbage, spilled horse feed, pet food and pieces of hide and blood can attract bears to the site.

If You Encounter a Bear

All bears are individuals, so all bear encounters will be unique. Serious attacks are rare but you must always be cautious and alert when in bear country. Doing everything to avoid an encounter is the best practice.

What should I do if I see a bear but the bear doesn't see me?

- Don't attract attention. Leave the way you came without calling attention to yourself. Retreat slowly while keeping your eye on the bear.
- If you must move forward, give the bear a wide berth. If you have no choice but to move forward, give the bear as much space as you can.



- Stay alert. Even if you think you are a safe distance away from the bear, remain quiet, and alert. Continue watching for the bear until you reach your destination.

What should I do if I see a bear and the bear sees me?

- Look around. If you see cubs or an animal carcass, the bear will want to protect them. Back away. Do not run.
- Leave the area the way that you came. Keep your eye on the bear without staring at it aggressively. As you back away, seek out a place of safety. Remember that both black bears and grizzly bears can climb trees so, if you do choose to climb a tree, go as high as you can.
- Speak to the bear. Let the bear know that you are human and not a prey animal.
- Use your noisemaker and prepare to defend yourself with bear spray.

How should hunters respond in bear encounters?

Though it may seem that using a firearm will guarantee safety in a bear encounter, keep in mind the following:

- A recent US study shows that in bear attacks, only 2 per cent of people were hurt – and then only with minor injuries – when defending themselves with bear spray.
- To successfully deter a bear with bear spray, you need only spray a cloud of bear spray at the approaching animal. To successfully stop a bear with a firearm requires a much more precise aim, a perfectly functioning firearm and an uncommonly cool head. A bear can run up to 60 km/hour. When a bear is charging in your direction at that speed, you will likely not have time to load, accurately aim and discharge your firearm. A cloud of bear spray, however, can deter the bear from making contact.
- Bears are not always immediately felled by a bullet. A bear that does not die immediately can become increasingly aggressive, putting you at greater risk of injury.
- Hunters should carry bear spray and use it as their first line of defense against bears.

What is a defensive encounter?

A defensive encounter occurs when the bear is feeling stressed or threatened. It may have been surprised by your sudden appearance or feels you are a threat to itself, its cubs or its food source. In such an encounter, the bear may show some of the following behaviours:

- Vocalizing, such as blowing, huffing, “woofing”, growling or snapping its jaws
- Flicking ears back

- Swatting the ground
- Swaying the head
- Making a bluff charge

What should I do in a defensive encounter?

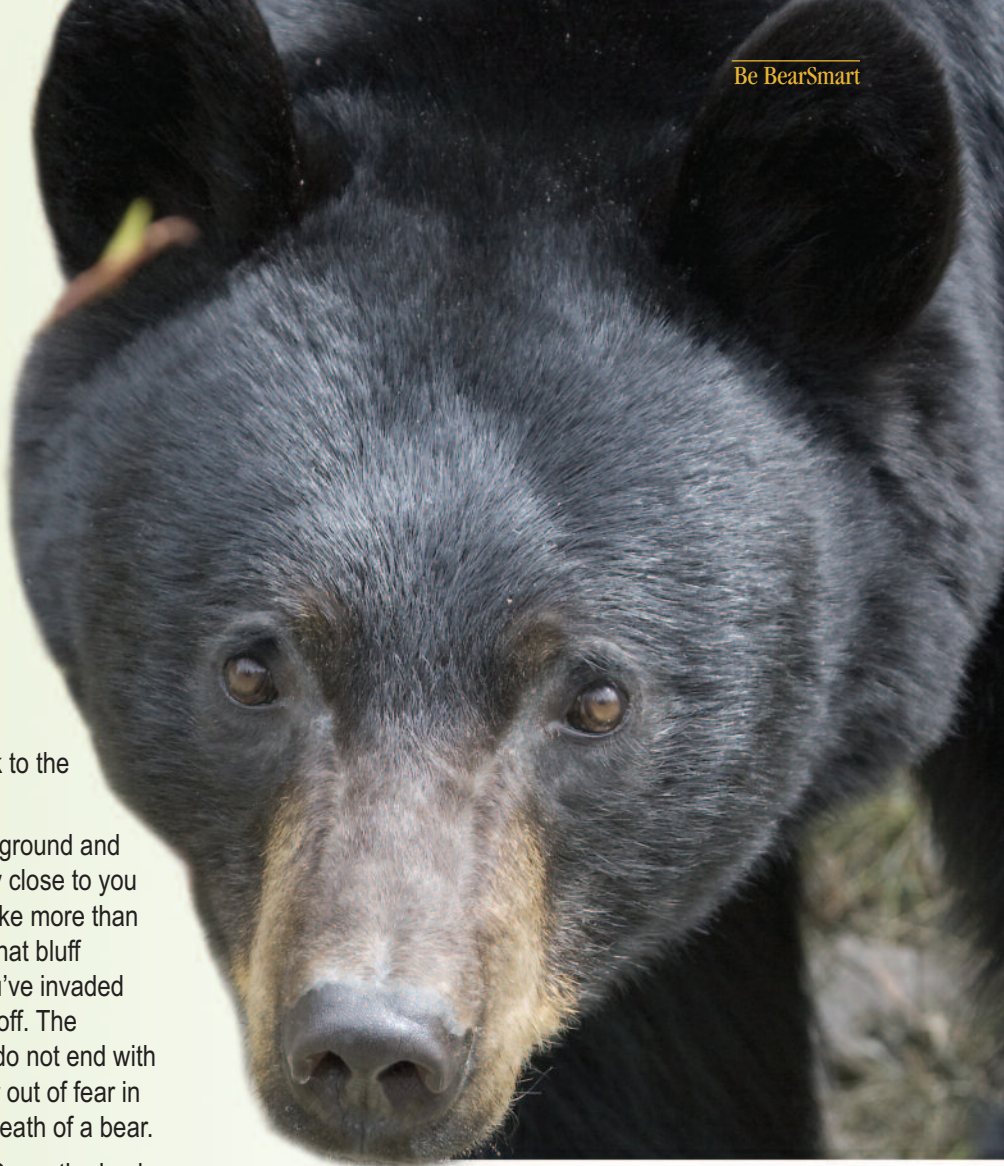
Hunters have an important role in preventing human-bear encounters and bear mortalities. Don't let a careless moment result in an injury to you, your party, or the needless death of a bear.

- Prepare to use your bear spray.
- Speak to the bear. Speaking calmly to the bear shows you are not a prey animal and helps to keep you calm.
- Back away slowly without turning your back to the bear.
- If the bear charges, do not run. Stand your ground and use your bear spray. A bear may come very close to you when making a bluff charge, and it may make more than one bluff charge. NEVER run. Remember that bluff charges are made to communicate that you've invaded the bear's space and it wants you to move off. The majority of charges are, in fact, bluffs, and do not end with the bear making contact. Shooting the bear out of fear in bluff situations may result in the needless death of a bear.
- If the bear does make contact, play dead. Cover the back of your neck with your hands. Lie on your stomach with your legs anchored in the ground. If the bear rolls you over, roll back on to your stomach. Don't move until you're sure the bear has left the area.
- Once the bear has stopped, remain quiet. Yelling at the bear may provoke it into a further attack.
- Defensive attacks are short. If the bear has started to bite or if the attack is prolonged, it may have turned predatory (see below).

The bear sees me, is not showing signs of stress, and is closing the distance. Why?

A bear that does not leave the area once it has detected you may be curious, looking for a handout, attempting to assert its dominance or be assessing you as a potential food source. This is a predatory or non-defensive bear. It will not show signs of stress and will:

- Stare intently;
- Circle around you to detect your scent;



- Remain quiet;
- Approach in a slow, hesitant manner; and/or
- Keep its head and its ears up.

What should I do in these kinds of encounters?

- Do not run. Prepare to fight with all means at your disposal. Do not play dead when the bear is showing these behaviours.
- Make yourself look big and shout at the bear. Remind the bear that you are not easy prey.
- Use your noisemaker and bear spray. Continue to use your bear spray, even when in close contact with the bear.
- If the bear makes contact, fight back as forcefully as you can.



Bear Deterrents

Hunters in bear country should be prepared to encounter a bear at any time. While following BearSmart practices can reduce the likelihood of an encounter, carrying and knowing how to properly use bear deterrents can help prevent injury if you do encounter a bear. The two most effective bear deterrents are bear spray and noisemakers. Carry both.

When I see a bear, should I use a noisemaker or bear spray?

- Noisemakers are best used to deter a bear that is at a distance or approaching your camp or settlement.
- Before using noisemakers, be sure you can assess the situation. Make sure the surroundings are clear of people and that the bear has an obvious way out. A bear startled by a noisemaker may not be able to avoid groups of people as it flees the area.

- Keep in mind a noisemaker may not immediately deter the bear, especially if the bear has had previous experience with a noisemaker. Also, noisemakers may not prevent the bear from returning to the area.
- Bear spray is best used when you need to deter a bear at close range. Always be sure to carry bear spray on your belt when in bear country.

Bear spray

Does bear spray work?

- In a study of Alaska bear encounters, it was found that 98 per cent of those who used bear spray were uninjured by the bear. The remaining 2 per cent received only minor injuries that required no hospitalization.
- Bear spray can work in three ways:
 - The active ingredient (oleoresin capsicum) irritates the eyes, nose and lungs, causing severe but temporary blindness and breathing restriction.
 - The unusual sound and sight of deployed bear spray can sometimes be enough to startle a bear off its course.
 - Having bear spray provides people with a tool for responding appropriately in a bear encounter. Those who use bear spray do not resort to other, potentially dangerous responses, such as running away.
- Bear spray is an essential part of your gear, but having it does not mean that you can forego other BearSmart practices. Even when carrying bear deterrents, it's essential to stay alert and diligent in preventing bear encounters.



Buying bear spray

- Be sure the canister is labelled "for deterring bear attacks."
- The canister should weigh at least 225 grams (7.9 ounces).
- Check the canister's expiry date and replace it when necessary. If the bear spray was purchased outside of Canada, it may not state the expiry date. In this case, check directly with the manufacturer to find out how long the bear spray will be effective.
- Be sure to purchase a belt or chest holster to carry your bear spray.

Practising bear spray use

- It's important to understand the range and force of your bear spray, as well as how to deploy it quickly.
- Practise reaching for your spray until you can retrieve it quickly.
- It's best to practise using bear spray with an expired canister. Keep in mind, however, that outdated spray canisters may not have the same pressure as newer ones. You can also practise with an inert canister, which has the same spraying power but not the hot pepper ingredient.
- A 225-g canister contains enough bear spray for about 8 seconds of use. If practising with a canister that you'll be carrying later, remember to conserve as much as you can. If you suspect that you have used more than 1/3 of your bear spray, buy a new canister to carry in bear country.
- If you can, practise using bear spray in a location outside of bear country. Residual bear spray has been known to attract bears, so do not practise using bear spray when you're on the trail or at camp.
- If you discharge bear spray from your canister, be sure to clean off the nozzle so bear spray doesn't get on your clothes, gear, body or eyes.

Storing bear spray

- The safety clip should always be in place when the spray is not in use.
- Keep the canister away from items that could crush or puncture it.
- Never leave the canister in direct sunlight or anywhere temperatures can become very hot or very cold. Do not store the bear spray in your vehicle and don't use bear spray that you suspect has been frozen.
- Special regulations apply to transporting bear spray in aircraft. Always talk to the airline/pilot before taking bear spray on your flight.

Carrying bear spray

- Keep the spray accessible. Carry it in a hip or chest holster, and not in your backpack or with your other gear.
- When biking or quadding, the best option is to keep the bear spray in a chest holster or jersey pocket.
- You can also modify the bear spray canister to fit inside the water bottle holder on your bike, or you can install a special bear spray mount. Remember, if you keep your bear spray on your bike or quad, you may not be able to reach it if you are separated from your bike or quad during a bear encounter.
- While sleeping, keep the spray next to your flashlight.

Using bear spray

Bears are normally wary of people and will leave if they know that you are in the area. If the bear sees you and continues to approach, prepare to deter it with your bear spray.

- Stand your ground. Do not run and do not play dead.
- Evaluate the wind direction. If possible, rotate so the wind is at your back.
- Speak in an authoritative voice and make yourself appear larger.
- Be prepared to spray - remove the safety clip.
- Aim low in front of the bear so the animal runs into the spray.
- If a bear approaches:
 - **At 9 m to 15 m (30 ft. to 50 ft.)** fire a warning blast for ½ to 1 second, aiming the bear spray slightly downward.
 - **At 6 m to 9 m (20 ft. to 30 ft.)** fire 1-2-second blasts in continuous succession, aiming slightly downward in front of the bear's head until the bear leaves.
 - **At 0 to 6 m (0 to 20 ft.)** fire 1-2-second blasts in continuous succession, aiming at the head, or into the nose and mouth of the bear until the bear leaves.
- Hold your breath.
- Be sure to move out of the bear's way.
- Spray and react. Try to keep some bear spray in reserve. Always re-evaluate your situation.
- When the attack is interrupted, retreat. Do not run. Do not turn your back on the bear.
- As the bear leaves, go a different direction.

First aid treatment for bear spray

- Anyone who's been accidentally sprayed should be moved from the contaminated area to fresh air as quickly as possible.
- Flush exposed skin with cold water and soap. Mild, non-oil-based soaps, such as baby soaps, are best.
- Do not rub exposed areas. Pat dry with a towel.
- To flush spray out of your eyes, place your head under water and open your eyes every few seconds. Do not rub your eyes. Remove contact lenses.
- Do not apply lotions or creams to the exposed areas.
- If the effects of the spray do not dissipate in 30 to 45 minutes, seek medical attention.

Noisemakers

The most effective noisemakers in bear country are the people working and recreating there. Talking or singing loudly can help prevent surprise encounters with wildlife. With enough warning of your approach, wildlife should have time to move themselves and their young from the area.

Using Noisemakers

- Use noisemakers to scare away bears that are aware of your presence but do not leave the area.
- Do not use bangers or screamers in dry forest conditions. They may cause a forest fire.
- Do not shoot the noise deterrents directly at the bear.
- Ensure bangers explode between you and the bear. A banger that explodes behind the bear may startle it so the bear runs back in your direction.
- Be prepared to defend yourself with bear spray in case the noisemaker is ineffective.

Types of Noisemakers

- Airhorns: Easily carried in bear country; create a loud, piercing sound of greater than 120 decibels.
- Bangers: Available for pen-launchers, .22 calibre launchers, and 12-gauge launchers. Creates a loud bang after travelling 20 to 100 metres (66 to 328 feet).
- Screamers: Similar to bangers except they create a loud, continuous screeching noise for approximately 100 metres (328 feet). The flight pattern is erratic. Because these projectiles can be unpredictable, be extremely cautious when using them.

Noisemaker Safety

- Noisemakers that fire a projectile (bangers or screamers) should be stored and carried unloaded.
- Always be aware of the line of fire.
- Be aware of the potential for a ricochet.
- To avoid personal injury or death, never point or fire a noisemaker projectile at a person.
- Ensure you are not using bangers or screamers that are old, or that have been wet or altered in any way. They may prematurely explode and cause injury.



Electric Fencing

Electric fences provide a cost-effective means to prevent bears from entering campsites and stealing food or harvested game. While management of odours will minimize the likelihood that a bear will approach a camp, fences can prevent bears from receiving a food reward or causing damage. Several types of portable fencing systems are available that have proven to be effective barriers for bears. Specially designed light-weight fencing systems that utilize AA or D cell batteries are available for use in backcountry situations. These systems weigh less than 4 kilograms (10 pounds), can run for several days or weeks on one set of batteries and have been proven to keep bears away from game carcasses.

- The fence material should consist of metal wire or interwoven poly-metal wire.
- A variety of insulators and lightweight plastic or fibreglass stakes or posts are available. If insulators are temporarily attached to trees, care must be taken not to injure the tree, and all materials should be removed when leaving the site.
- The fence voltage should be tested regularly to ensure proper grounding. Water can be poured in the area of the ground rod in drier soils if required.

Electric fencing must be properly installed and regularly maintained in order to be effective.



Photo Credit: Stuart Nadeau

What about cougars?

Cougars are expanding their range in Alberta and can be encountered in many areas of the province.

Unlike bears, cougars will rarely attack humans to defend their young or a source of food. Also unlike bears, they are rarely attracted to human food or garbage. However, in extremely rare circumstances, cougars may view people as a potential food source. There have been only 19 fatal attacks by cougars on humans in North America over the past 100 years, and many of these involved small children or adults jogging or hiking by themselves.

Hunters should be aware cougars, like bears, may be attracted to game calls. Whenever possible, hunt with a partner and keep careful watch for predators when trying to attract game.

If you do encounter a cougar in the field, the best response is to make it clear to the cougar that you are not potential prey. Cougars are curious and may watch you from a distance. Most of the time, a cougar that is observing you is only trying to satisfy its curiosity. To make it clear to the cougar that you are not a prey animal, stand up, make yourself appear large, shout loudly and use your noisemaker if necessary. If the cougar approaches within 12 metres (the length of a bus), use bear spray to deter it. If you are attacked, fight back with any weapon at your disposal. Cougars are relatively timid and will usually run away if they feel threatened or realize that you are not easy prey.

If camping with dogs, keep in mind that the dogs may attract a cougar. Always keep your dog under your close control to keep it safe and to prevent it from provoking unwanted encounters with wildlife.

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