

Surviving a bear encounter

Most advice concerning interactions between hikers and bears aims at preventing problems: Make noise and be alert while hiking, hike in groups, keep a clean camp, store food and trash 10 feet off the ground, and so on.

But what do you do if you actually encounter a grizzly or black bear, or in the extremely rare event of a bear attack?

Every bear encounter is different, and no advice can guarantee your safety. However, these guidelines developed by some of North America's most authoritative bear experts could help:

The first step is to determine whether a bear is acting defensively or offensively. That's the advice from the Alaska Interagency Bear Safety Education Committee. These bear experts say a *defensive* bear is one you have surprised, which can elicit an extremely rapid attack. If such a bear strikes or bites, you should drop to the ground (keeping your pack on), lie flat, and protect your head and neck. Continue to play dead until the bear leaves.

An *offensive* bear is one that appears to be stalking or moving purposefully toward you, or has come into camp at night. In these extremely rare cases, say bear experts, make loud noises and wave your arms *before* the bear makes contact. If the bear does strike or bite, aggressively fight it off with any means at your disposal.

Guidelines based on the distance between you and a bear have been devised by Bill Schneider, Helena author of *Bear Aware* and *Where the Grizzly Walks*. Schneider developed them with Steve Herrero, professor emeritus at the University of Calgary and project leader for the Eastern Slopes Grizzly Bear Project. Schneider and Herrero stress the importance of determining whether a bear is acting defensively or offensively, as explained above. They also point out that

staying calm is probably the best way to avoid injury. Their other guidelines:

1. Bear at a distance: If you see a bear far off, stop moving toward the bear. Slowly return down the trail the way you came for at least 400 yards until the bear is out of sight. Then, either use another trail or wait 20 minutes before hiking back up the original trail, making lots of noise.

2. Bear on or near the trail: "Stand your ground and take out your bear pepper spray," says Schneider, who, like many bear authorities, advises hikers and campers in bear areas to keep a canister of approved bear pepper spray accessible at all times. While continuing to face the bear, slowly back away until it is out of sight. Continue back down the trail for at least 400 yards. Then either consider another route or follow the advice in number 1.

3. Bear at close range:

"The most important thing is to not panic, run wildly, or scream," says Schneider. "That could cause a bear to charge." Instead, stand still and be quiet. Get your pepper spray ready. If the bear does not move closer, it probably isn't aggressive, but stay put until you are sure. If the bear is not acting aggressively, slowly back away, talking to it quietly in a monotone voice. "Don't turn your back on the bear, run, kneel down, or make eye contact," says Schneider. "As you back up, slowly move your arms up and down, like jumping jacks without the jumping."

4. Charging bear: Again, don't panic. "Many charges are actually bluffs," says Schneider. "The grizzly just wants to scare you. Have your pepper spray ready, but don't spray unless the bear is within range." If the bear charges then stops, follow the advice in number 3, slowly backing away. If the bear doesn't stop, use the pepper spray. If that doesn't work, then you need to either play dead (defensive bear attack) or aggressively fight back (offensive bear attack).



You encounter this. Now what?