

Safety Guide to Bears at Your Home

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British Columbia is bear country. No matter where you live or spend your leisure time in this province - even in urban areas - you will be near bears or bear habitat.

The Ministry of Environment, Lands and Parks receives thousands of bear complaints yearly. Every year, some 200 to 400 black bears and 10 to 30 grizzly bears are killed because they were perceived to be dangerous to human life or property.

Over the years, people have tended to settle into lush valley bottoms and along creeks - places where bears have lived for thousands of years. We can't expect bears to change; instead, we must modify our own behaviour to allow bears and people the freedom to live each other safely.

WHY DOES CONTACT OCCUR?

Because of people:

Bears need large quantities of food to survive and produce young. Odours from carelessly stored food and garbage can lure bears long distances. Once a bear has tasted human food or garbage, it will remember the source and return again and again - bears have been known to return hundreds of kilometres to a human food source after having been relocated.

Because of other bears:

Young bears, especially young males, are not tolerated by adult bears. They may search for new habitats and wander near our communities. Females with cubs may also be forced to feed near human settlements because adult male bears may kill cubs.

Because natural foods fail:

Berries, salmon, and succulent vegetation are important bear foods. Climatic factors such as drought or frost may result in a food shortage, and bears will travel hundreds of kilometres in search of food. Although they generally avoid us, a hungry bear will have less fear of humans.

Because the bears are not healthy:

Orphaned cubs and old, sick, or injured bears may be unable to forage, and may seek out easier sources, such as human food or garbage.

WHAT YOU SHOULD DO

Be alert:

Watch for bears when they are active between May and October, but especially during August and September.

If you live in a mild area such as Vancouver Island or the Lower Mainland, bears may be active all year.

Be careful:

Do not feed bears.

Keep outdoor storage containers, such as those for pet foods and livestock feed, air-tight and odour free. Use bear-resistant containers whenever possible, or better still, keep supplies indoors.

Do not leave garbage, pet food or livestock feed in the back of pickup trucks, even under canopies. Canopies are not bear-resistant containers.

Dogs may be effective at warning you if a bear is nearby, but make sure all dogs are restrained or in a fenced yard.

Locate compost heaps, livestock, beehives, and other bear food sources away from forests, thickets and natural pathways used by bears.

Enclose fruit trees, livestock, or beehives with strong chain-link or electric fencing.

Thin the bush on your property or create a break in natural bear pathways that lead to your house.

Garbage:

Keep garbage containers indoors - inside a locked shed, garage, or basement until pick-up day.

Dispose of garbage regularly - don't stockpile it or it will begin to smell and attract bears.

Never leave fish parts, meat bones, or other meat byproducts where a bear's sensitive nose can find them - keep them in your freezer until you can dispose of them properly.

Compost:

Do not put meat byproducts, fish, or fruit into your compost.

Sprinkle your compost with lime. Lime aids the composting process, and also reduces the smell, discouraging bears.

Beehives:

Place beehives on a platform with an overhang more than two metres above the ground, or surround them with electric fencing.

Don't set up beehives in the early spring when other bear foods are not yet abundant.

Wire beehives together with metal strapping.

Barbecues:

Be watchful at barbecues. The smell from cooking meat attracts bears.

Store barbecues inside.

Wash grills immediately after use. The smell of an uncleaned grill can attract bears even if it is stored.

Fruit trees:

Pick fruit daily as it ripens; don't allow it to fall.

Pick the fruit before it ripens if you don't intend to use it right away.

WHAT IS THE CONSERVATION OFFICER'S RESPONSIBILITY?

Handling wildlife problems is largely the responsibility of the Ministry of Environment, Lands and Parks. Conservation officers must safeguard human life and protect bears.

Can bears be moved?

Most contact with bears ends safely with the bear's voluntary departure. If Conservation Officers were called in to relocate every bear seen by the public, there would be very little time or energy to devote to other wildlife protection activities. However, Conservation Officers will move bears if:

The bear poses a threat to human life or property;
Live bear traps can be used safely;
The bear can be drugged without injury and without endangering the Conservation Officer or the public;
Suitable bear habitat is available (distant enough so that the bear is unlikely to return, yet close enough so that the move is practical); and
The bear has not grown accustomed to human food or garbage.
Relocating bears is not an ideal solution. Areas for release are not always available, and zoos or game farms are not always available, and zoos and game farms are rarely suitable options. Many relocated bears find their new habitat occupied, and may be killed by the existing bears or starved if food supplies are limited. Others are forced to return to human food sources, where they may be destroyed as repeat offenders.

A bear will not be moved if it is:

Aggressive;
Accustomed to human food or garbage;
Too young to establish a territory;
Wounded, sick, starving, or old; or
Immediately hazardous to people or property.
PROBLEM BEARS WHICH CANNOT BE MOVED ARE DESTROYED.

IF YOU SPOT A BEAR IN A RESIDENTIAL AREA OR IN A TREE WITH PEOPLE NEARBY:

Remain calm. Often, the bear is just passing through and, if it finds no food source, will simply move on.
Keep away from the bear. Warn others to keep away as well, and bring your children and pets into the house.
If the bear appears to be threatening, persistent, or aggressive, call the Conservation Officer in your area. If there is no Conservation Officer in your area, phone local police or the RCMP. If conflict should occur, do not attempt to resolve it yourself. The Conservation Officer is a professional and has been trained to deal with wildlife.
This page is part of a series directed to bear safety in British Columbia. Also check the BC Environment Safety Guide to Bears in the Wild, which describes how to avoid conflict with bears in wilderness areas.