

DRI Wildlife Safety Guidelines

Introduction

*“Lions and Tigers and Bears, Oh My!”*¹ Well not exactly, but wildlife dangers should be considered as part of the hazard assessment and mitigation process when field work requires traveling in the backcountry. When the work will take place in bear country, they are the number one wildlife safety concern. Although mountain lion (cougar) attacks are rare, they are possible, as is injury from any wild animal. Generally speaking all mammals are unpredictable if they perceive a threat from humans, (i.e., this could include any action that interrupts the animal's natural instincts or activities) such as:

- Getting between a parent and young animal
- Being present during an animal's mating cycles
- Interrupting animals while they are eating
- Being perceived as prey
- Startling/surprising animals
- Blocking an animal's escape routes

Other larger wild animals to be on the look out for in North America are elk, deer, bison and moose, which can be aggressive toward humans especially during mating and birthing seasons; badgers, which are just plain mean; and bobcats, coyotes, foxes and wolves, which can bite (and the latter three may also carry rabies). Smaller mammals such as skunks, raccoons and rodents (rabbits, chipmunks, squirrels and mice) may bite and scratch and may harbor diseases communicable to humans.

Be sure you are aware of which wild animals may be present at your field site, what hazards they might present and how to address safety issues that may arise due to their presence. In general

- **Do not** feed wildlife.
- **Do not** approach or follow wildlife.
- If your presence alters an animal's behavior, you are too close.
- **Be alert for poisonous snakes and insects.** Watch where you place your hands and feet, always carry a flashlight at night, and shake out your shoes and clothes before putting them on.

Some specific tips follow for bears and mountain lions.

Bear Safety

General Safety Information:

- Never approach a bear, they are dangerous and unpredictable.
- Food, garbage and their odors attract bears. Always use bear-proof facilities and techniques.
- **DON'T** hike or cycle alone - **BE ALERT** and make **NOISE**.

¹ Quoting Dorothy in the 1939 movie, “The Wizard of Oz”

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- If you encounter a bear DO NOT run or cry out. Stay calm, retreat slowly by backing away while avoiding eye contact.

When camping in bear country:

- Keep a clean camp. Store only sleeping gear and clean clothing in the tent. Never sleep in the clothing worn while cooking.
- Hang all food, garbage, cooking gear, and cosmetics in a tree at least 10 feet above the ground and 4 feet from the tree trunk or nearby branches. Some camp sites provide a device for storing or hanging food or other items. If present, use it. If you are camped near your vehicle, store these items in the trunk. PVC-type float sacks can be used for storage as they will minimize odors.
- Never use the tent or sleeping bag stuff sacks to store food, garbage, cooking gear, or cosmetics because this practice may transmit smells attractive to bears to the tent and sleeping bag.
- Never bury or burn garbage. Dispose of used tampons or sanitary napkins by packing them out in a sealed plastic bag.
- Never cook in or near a tent. Pitch your tent 100 yards uphill from the area where you're cooking and storing food, if possible.
- To avoid cooking strong-smelling foods; use dehydrated foods and use a stove instead of a cooking fire whenever possible.
- Store horse feed the same as human food.

When hiking in bear country

- Leave a travel plan with a co-worker. Be sure to sign in and out at the trailhead.
- Stay informed about recent bear activity in the area.
- Stay alert. Bears travel along trails and rivers. Watch for natural bottlenecks that could funnel bears into your space.
- Watch for bear signs, such as paw prints, fresh digs, etc.
- Recognize prime feeding areas, such as berry fields, fish spawning areas, and animal carcasses and if possible, avoid them.
- Stay on trails and hike in groups, during daylight hours, and in the open when possible. Make noise by talking, singing, or clapping hands when visibility is limited.
- Watch for noisy streams and wind directions that may mask your sound and scent.
- Just because you don't see a bear doesn't mean they are not around. Grizzly bears hide or make daybeds in thick brush. All bears have the ability to climb trees.
- Always carry a used bandana, shirt, or parka that you can drop easily. Avoid dropping food, this will only encourage the bear's aggressiveness toward other hikers.

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If you encounter a bear:

- Stay calm and give it plenty of room. Do not move quickly or startle it. Keep up wind if possible and detour slowly. If you can't detour wait until it moves away before proceeding.
- When a bear first detects a human, it may stand upright and use its senses to figure out what and where it has detected. An agitated bear may move its head side-to-side, and huff or clack its teeth. Flattened ears and raised hair on the back of the neck are signs of aggression.
- Once a bear identifies you, it may ignore you, move slowly away, run or it may charge. Wild bears rarely attack unless they feel threatened or provoked. Try to let the bear know you are human by standing tall, waving your arms over your head and speaking in a firm, even tone as you back away slowly.
- If a bear approaches, **HOLD YOUR GROUND, DON'T RUN and DON'T DROP YOUR PACK, DON'T CLIMB A TREE.** Back away slowly if the bear stops. Never play dead unless a bear actually makes contact with you, then keep your pack on, pull your knees up toward your chin and stay as quiet as possible.

Mountain Lion (Cougar, Panther)

Mountain lion sightings and encounters have increased throughout the western U.S. partly due to encroachment on the lion's habitat. Most mountain lions will avoid confrontations. A few safety tips to consider when hiking in the backcountry where lions may be present are:

- Never hike alone.
- Be noisy when hiking to avoid surprising a mountain lion.
- Be on the lookout for lion signs and tracks.
- Carry a big stick that can be used for protection.
- Never approach a mountain lion and be sure to leave them an avenue of escape.
- If confronted, stay calm and hold your ground. **DO** all you can to appear larger and to convince the lion you are not prey (wave arms, throw rocks, speak loudly).
- Never turn your back on a lion, back away slowly.
- If attacked, fight back.