

# Living with bears

## OUTDOOR LIFE IN BEAR AREAS



PHOTO: STEINAR WIKMAN

For some, the idea of encountering a wild bear is attractive, but for others it is rather daunting. For outdoor recreationists in bear areas, it is important to have good knowledge about bear behaviour in order to avoid undesirable confrontations with bears. Bears themselves generally avoid contact with humans, but such encounters do occasionally occur. Although bears are generally not dangerous, they can be in certain situations.

You can prepare yourself for such an encounter by understanding bear behaviour and body language. In this

brochure, you will become better acquainted with bears and learn how they can behave in different situations. You will also receive practical advice on what to consider when hiking, camping, fishing, hunting, picking berries or mushrooms, or any other activity in areas where bears occur. The text is based on literature and experience with brown bears in Scandinavia and North America.

### Bears In Scandinavia

The bear population in Sweden were estimated to about 3.000 bears in 2009. The growth rate of the population is around 5 % per year, which means that it is increasing slowly. The expansion is rather slowly since females disperse and settle relatively

short distances from their birthplaces. Male bears however, can migrate long distances. Reproducing females is mainly found in north of Sweden down to the counties of Dalarna and Gävleborg. Observations of bears are also reported annually in the counties of Värmland, Örebro, Västmanland and Uppsala.

The brown bear is an omnivore. When they emerge from the den in April they start eating protein-rich foods high such as ants or animal carcasses. After snowmelt they may shift to eating grass or last year's berries or prey upon moose and reindeer calves. In summer, bears eat ants and termites, various plants and herbs, and in certain parts of Norway they can also kill many sheep. When blueberries begin to ripen bears will eat enormous quantities, as much as a third of their body weight each day! Bears convert the sugar in berries into a fat reserve they use while hibernating during winter.

Since bears have such large energy requirements, they spend most of their time searching for food. They have a well-developed sense of smell, and can locate carcasses under more than 2 m of soil. When compared to us, bears have excellent hearing, but their eyesight is less developed. Bears make full use of their senses when assessing potentially threatening situations.

### When humans and bears meet

Bears are big and intelligent creatures that evoke respect. While some people would like to encounter a wild bear, this prospect makes others anxious. The Scandinavian brown bear strongly shuns people and is not nearly as aggressive as its counterparts elsewhere in the world. Most encounters between bears and humans are peaceful in nature, and direct confrontations are a rarity. A basic rule for avoiding such confrontations is to remove the element of surprise. A bear can feel threatened if you suddenly appear without it first sensing your presence, and may react defensively.



PHOTO: MAGNUS KRISTOFFERSSON

Bear den dug out in an old ant hill.

## Situations that can lead to conflicts between humans and bears

Under certain circumstances, we may experience situations where a bear may not move away when it is approached. Even in such situations, a bear rarely feels so threatened that it must react aggressively in order to defend itself, its food or its cubs from us.

### Fed or Habituated Bears

If a bear repeatedly succeeds in procuring food in close proximity to people, it will gradually become less wary and bold. Through such habituation a bear can eventually lose all respect for humans and become dangerous. Remember, a fed bear is a dead bear!

### Females with cubs

Mother bears have a very strong defensive instinct for their young. If a mother bear is surprised, she may chase her cubs up a tree or into some other refuge while simultaneously defending them from a perceived threat. However, females generally follow their offspring quite closely and thus the probability of coming between a mother and her cubs is quite small.



PHOTO: MAGNUS KRISTOFFERSSON

### A bear on a carcass

A bear that is lying on a carcass or other food source may choose to stay put in the presence of people because they would rather not surrender their food. In most cases a bear will abandon a carcass as a person continues to approach, but it may well choose to defend it from you.



PHOTO: MAGNUS ELANDER

Attentive bear at carcass.

### A bear near its den

There have been a number of confrontations between bears and people at dens. Bears generally prefer to stay near their dens rather than abandoning them. If people come too close to the mouth of a den, they risk the possibility of being run over by an escaping bear.

### Dogs

Bears can feel threatened by the presence of dogs, though this is rare in Scandinavia. In most situations where this occurs, the bears will focus its attention and aggression towards the dog rather than the owner.

### A wounded or injured bear

Through collective experience we know that there is only one situation where Scandinavian bears can truly be dangerous and that is when they have been wounded or injured. This is particularly important if you are considering the idea of shooting a bear or for those who are tracking a bear that has already been wounded or injured as the result of a vehicle collision or other accident.

## What is a bear saying with its body language?

Bears clearly signal how distressed they are in a given situation through a specific order of different behaviors. Such body language reduces the risk for fights between bears. We can avoid confrontations by learning to interpret bear behaviour and the signals they send us when they feel threatened.

## Learn to read bear body language

How does a bear experience an encounter with people, how do they express themselves, and what do they mean?

### A bear is curious or unsure

The bear stands still on its hind legs, sniffing the air and trying to catch a scent. It may then approach on all fours with its head held high and ears erect, or it may turn tail and run and later return to further investigate.

*The bear is attempting to gather more information about you and may need to more closely investigate in order to better assess a situation in which it feels uncertain. This is not aggressive behavior, since the bear is only trying to determine whether or not you are a threat.*

### A bear feels stressed

The bear may stand or sit while it swings its head slowly back and forth and looks in your general direction without making eye contact. It may also gape, whine, drool or pop its jaws together.

*The bear is indicating that it is stressed and uncomfortable with your presence.*

### A bear is irritated

A bear that stands and glares directly at you is displaying a more aggressive posture than a bear that looks askance at you. The bear may swing its head



PHOTO: STAFFAN WIDSTRAND

Curious, investigative bear. The bear stands up on his hind legs to get a better view of a situation.

back and forth, in addition to slapping one or both forepaws on the ground while facing you. It can also pace back and forth in the same spot. If the bear becomes more agitated, it can jump up and down with its forepaws on a stump or other protrusion or hop forward on stiff legs. It will continue to occasionally swing its head from side to side, and gape, growl or pop its jaws together.

*This is a clear signal that the bear considers you a threat and that you must leave.*

### **A bear is aggressive and threatening**

The bear can continue to exhibit all the signals described above. In addition, it may begin to swat trees and bushes as a displacement activity, but it is irritated at and threatening you.

*In this situation you have exceeded its threshold for tolerance and are too close.*

If the bear continues to feel threatened, it will stop vocalizing and swinging its head. Its body will become tense and it will lower his head with a fixed gaze towards you. This is often followed by a final warning consisting of a bluff charge. When a bear bluff charges, it will run towards you and either stop just in front of you begin to slap the ground or a bush with its paws, or rush on by at close range. This is a very unnerving experience and it can be very difficult to judge whether the bear is bluffing or really

attacking. In cases where hunters have shot bears in self-defence, the bear may have actually been bluffing rather than attacking.

### **How to avoid confrontation between people and bears?**

The most important thing is to not surprise a bear. By doing this you avoid the greatest risk for winding up in a confrontation with a bear.

#### **Talk, sing, and make noise so that a bear will hear you**

Bears have well-developed senses but can still be surprised by people approaching quietly from upwind. This is particularly true for hunters or anglers that sneak quietly, as well as hikers, berry and mushroom pickers, joggers, etc. Near noisy waterways bears may still not sense your approach even if you are making noise. If you are unsure, you should travel in the company of others, since more people always make more noise and are less vulnerable than those that are alone.



PHOTO: MAGNUS KRISTOFFERSSON

Fresh bear tracks. Are you prepared to meet a bear?

#### **Keep the wind at your back so bears can detect your scent**

A bear that caught wind of you will not be surprised.

#### **Learn to recognize bear sign**

Fresh tracks, feces, claw marks on trees and excavated anthills or tree stumps are all indicators that a bear may be nearby. Are you prepared for a meeting?

Bears often excavate their dens in large, overgrown anthills. Is there a bear in there?

Ravens and the smell of rotten meat can be signs of an animal carcass nearby. Bears are always interested in carcasses so if a bear is in the vicinity it will go to it. Will you?

### **Keep food and garbage inaccessible to bears**

A bear will use its exceptional sense of smell to follow the scent of anything that smells attractive. Outdoor recreationists should make sure to clean up all food remnants and garbage around cabins or tent sites in areas with lots of bears.

If hunters leave game meat out overnight in areas with many bears, there is a good chance a bear will find it. This can lead to destroyed meat and undesired contact between hunters and bears. Game meat should therefore be transported out of the area as soon as possible. Carcasses or offal should not be stored near hunting camps.

## **Never Feed Bears!**

#### **Be extra aware in dense vegetation**

Bears feel more secure in dense vegetation and will often rest under bushes, trees and undergrowth in such areas. Remember that such places can easily hide a bear and in such situations it is easy to come into close contact with one.

#### **Watch your dog's behavior**

If you have a dog with you pay attention to the signals it makes. Are they normal? What is your dog trying to signal? Listen closely to its barking, is it different than normal? Can you see what the dog is barking at? It may be a bear! If you are not hunting with a dog you should keep it under good control. In Sweden all dogs must be leashed from 1 Mars to 20 August.

#### **Do not shoot at bears**

If you are armed and encounter a bear: Don't shoot! It is extremely hard to shoot a bear when it is coming directly towards you. Its vital organs (heart and lungs) lay behind the base of the throat and protected by thick shoulders and the head. The chest is never exposed during a charge. Aiming for the brain is risky business since it is the size of a tennis ball. Hitting the brain would be like hitting a tennis ball coming towards you at 45-60 km / hour.

*Therefore resist the urge to shoot at all. In nearly all cases the bear is only bluff charging. If you wound a bear there is a great risk that it will become extremely dangerous.*



PHOTO: STENAR WIKMAN

## If the bear attacks

Lie down and play dead to show that you are no longer a threat to the bear. Lie flat on your belly or in a fetus position with your hands clasped over your neck. A backpack can protect your back. Stay as calm and quiet as possible. The bear will usually go on its way and discontinue its attack after some tens of seconds after it determines that you are no longer a threat.

If the bear does not stop attacking you should begin to fight back with all your might. Hit it with any available weapon, such as a stone, knife, or other object. Aim for the bear's nose, eyes or head. Predatory attacks, where humans are hunted as prey, have not been registered in Scandinavia in the last 100 years. However, they have happened infrequently in other parts of the world, such as North America and Siberia.

## How should you behave when you meet a bear?

### At longer distances – greater than 100 m

Show respect for the bear and calmly move away. Even though bears seem “nice” they react when people come within a certain critical distance. How great this distance is varies from bear to bear. If the wind direction and terrain allow, you should be able to safely observe the bear from longer distances, preferably over 200 m.

### At shorter distances – less than 100 m

Try to interpret the bear's mood by its body language. Does the bear seem stressed or is it simply curious about you?

### If the bear is curious or unsure

Make your presence known to the bear so that it understands that you are there. Speak in a tone similar to when you are speaking to another person. Don't shout! Shouting may make the bear aggressive. Try to let the bear catch wind of you. If the bear is coming towards you, try to make yourself appear larger by raising your arms over your head. Continue to talk to the bear and slowly move backwards the same way you came.

### If the bear is stressed

Immediately turn sideways to the bear so that your face and body are not directed towards it. Move away from the

bear while continuing to speak to it with a normal voice. By turning sideways you are showing the bear that you are submissive and not a threat. Don't run! It is impossible to outrun a bear and the quick movement can stimulate the bear to chase you as play or hunting response. Bears can climb trees so it is best to just continue to retreat calmly.

### If the bear is irritated

Turn your side towards the bear. Keep it in view but avoid direct eye contact. Move slowly away from the bear. Speak calmly to the bear so it always knows where you are and can see where you are moving. You can make yourself even more submissive by crouching down quietly.

### If the bear is aggressive and threatening

Back off immediately. Keep the bear in view but do not stare at it. Move slowly away. Do not run! Speak to the bear with an easy voice.

### If the bear makes a bluff charge

Hold your ground or go a couple steps backwards. If you stand still the bear will almost always veer off or stop just short of you. Stay calm! Make sure the bear knows you are a human by speaking calmly, but loud and clear. Toss or drop an object in front of the bear to distract it. Show that you are not a threat by moving away. A bear will usually calm down after a while, but in some instances it will charge repeatedly before it gives up.

## Final thoughts

We hope this brochure has answered some of your questions and that knowledge regarding bear behaviour can contribute to active and safe outdoor recreation in bear areas. The Scandinavian Bear Project has conducted several studies regarding bears and people since it was initiated in 1984. Researchers never carry weapons in the field, unless they are capturing bears, because they do not consider bears to be a threat as long as the simple rules outlined in this brochure are followed. In 2006 a new study was begun to document how bears react to people near presence. Visit the projects web pages for more information ([www.bearproject.info](http://www.bearproject.info)).

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