

Prevent bear encounters (Bear Wise)

How you and your community can prevent and report encounters with black bears.

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Who to contact

Emergencies

Call 911 or your local police, if you feel a bear poses an immediate threat to personal safety and:

- enters a school yard when school is in session
- enters or tries to enter a residence
- wanders into a public gathering
- kills livestock/pets and lingers at the site
- stalks people and lingers at the site

Generally, bears want to avoid humans. Most encounters are not aggressive and attacks are rare.

Non-emergencies

Call the Bear Wise reporting line at [1-866-514-2327](tel:1-866-514-2327) (*between April 1-November 30) if a bear is:

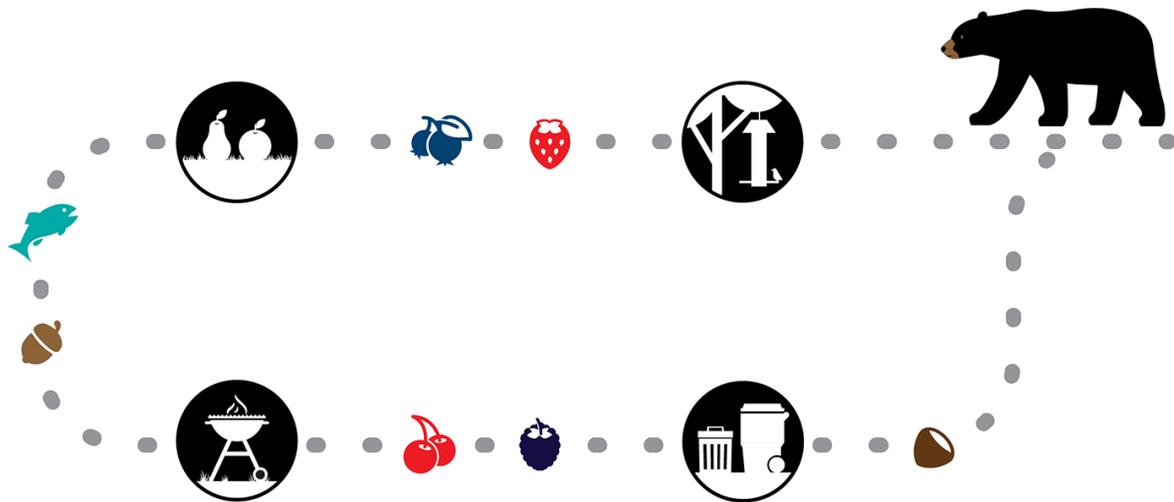
- roaming around, checking garbage cans
- breaking into a shed where garbage or food is stored
- in a tree
- pulling down a bird feeder or knocking over a barbecue
- moving through a backyard or field but is not lingering

* From Dec 1-March 31, please contact your local [MNRF District office](#).

About black bears

Black bears live throughout most of Ontario. They primarily inhabit forested areas where they are best able to find food, refuge and den sites.

Eating habits and diet



Their entire life revolves around food. When they are not hibernating, bears spend most of their time looking for food.

From the time they come out of hibernation until berry crops are available, bears live off their stored fat and the limited energy provided by fresh spring greens. They get most of their food energy by feeding on summer berry crops like blueberries, raspberries, and cherries. In the fall, they turn their attention to hazel nuts, mountain ash, acorns and beech nuts.

Though black bears will eat carrion, insects, fish, deer fawns and moose calves, the bulk of their diet is plant material. Their natural preference is to find lots of high energy food – like berry patches – that will help them fatten up fast. Their survival and ability to have and raise young depend on their ability to put on weight before going into winter hibernation.

The availability of their natural food varies from season to season and from year to year. When natural food sources are poor, black bears will travel long distances to seek out alternative sources of food.

How to prevent conflicts with black bears

Bears usually avoid humans. But they are attracted into urban and rural areas to get food. They will topple bird feeders, ransack barbecues, raid garbage cans and even try to enter buildings. If they learn that they can find food where people live, bears will return again and again. Relocation and destruction are poor ways of trying to prevent conflicts with bears.

You can prevent conflicts with bears by following these steps.

Remove bear attractants

When bears pick up a scent with their keen noses, they will investigate it. If they find bird food, garbage or pet food they will return as long as the food source is available.



Garbage

- put garbage out only on the morning of garbage day, not the night before
- put garbage in containers that have tight-fitting lids and store it in a bear-proof location such as your basement or a sturdy garage
- spray garbage cans and lids with bleach or another a strong disinfectant
- take garbage to the dump often, if you do not have curbside pick-up

Bird feeders

- fill bird feeders only through the winter months
- put away feeders in the spring and instead, offer birds natural alternatives (e.g. flowers, nesting boxes, fresh water)

Pet food

Do not leave pet food outdoors, in screened- in areas or porches

Fruits and berries

- pick all ripe and fallen fruit from trees and shrubs on your property
- plant non-fruit bearing trees and shrubs

Barbecue

- burn off food residue and wash the grill right away
- empty the grease trap every time you barbecue
- remove all utensils, dishes and food after eating

Avoid bear-human interactions

When out in bear country:

- travel in groups of 2 or more (bears primarily attack people who are alone)
- make noise as you move through areas where visibility is restricted or where background noise is high, such as near streams and waterfalls (e.g., singing, whistling or talking will alert bears to your presence, giving them a chance to avoid you)
- while outdoors, keep your eyes and ears open:
 - scan your surroundings to check for bears
 - do not wear music headphones
 - watch for signs of bear activity (e.g., tracks, claw marks on trees, flipped-over rocks or fresh bear droppings)
 - if you are out with a dog, leash it (uncontrolled, untrained dogs may actually lead a bear to you)
 - pay attention, especially if you are working, gardening or berry picking
 - occasionally scan your surroundings to check for bears
 - rise slowly if you are in a crouched position so that you don't startle nearby bears

Take community action

It takes the local community to prevent conflicts with bears. You may be doing your part, but if your neighbour is not, you may still encounter a bear on your property as a result.

Commit your community to becoming Bear Wise. Remind your neighbours to do their part by:

- sharing this information with your neighbours
- starting the conversation about how you can work together to prevent conflicts with bears (e.g. making sure the whole street waits until morning to put out garbage for collection)

Be prepared

When out in bear country:

- carry a whistle or air horn
- learn how to use bear pepper spray and carry it somewhere that's easy to access
- consider carrying a long-handled axe, if you are in remote areas or deep in the forest

If you encounter a black bear

Stop. Do not panic. Remain calm.

Quickly assess the situation and try to determine which type of an encounter this might be – sighting, surprise or close encounter.

When bears are caught off guard, they are stressed, and usually just want to flee. Generally, the noisier the bear is, the less dangerous it is, provided you don't approach the bear. The noise is meant to 'scare' you off and acts as a warning signal.

If you see a black bear:

- do not try to get closer to the bear for a better look or picture
- make sure the bear has a clear escape route — don't corner a bear
- always watch the bear and slowly back away until the bear is out of sight
- get inside, if you are near a building or vehicle
- leave the area, if you are berry-picking, hiking, camping, jogging or cycling
- if you are with others, stay together and act as a group
- if the bear does not get closer to you, slowly back away, talking to the bear in a quiet, monotone voice

Bear warning signs

Black bear attacks are **extremely rare**. A black bear may attack if it:

- feels threatened - if it perceives you to be a threat to it, its cubs or it may be defending food - this is a defensive bear that wants more space between you and it
- is a predatory bear - usually occur in rural or remote areas. Predatory bears approach silently, and may continue to approach regardless of your attempts to deter them by yelling or throwing rocks

There are **warning signals** threatened or predatory bears give to let you know you are too close:

- **Stands on its hind legs** - a bear usually stands to get a better look at you or 'catch your scent'. This is not aggressive behaviour.
- **Acts defensively** - if a bear feels threatened by your presence, it may try to get you to back off and leave it alone. To do this, it may:
 - salivate excessively, exhale loudly, or make huffing, moaning, clacking and popping sounds with its mouth, teeth and jaws
 - lower its head with its ears drawn back while facing you
 - charge forward, and/or swat the ground with its paws (known as a 'bluff' charge)

Do not:

- scream
- turn your back on the bear
- run
- kneel down
- make direct eye contact
- climb a tree
- retreat into water or try and swim — a bear can do these things much better than you

Do:

- wave your arms to make yourself look bigger and yell at the bear to go away
- throw objects
- blow a whistle or an air horn
- make noise to try and persuade the bear to leave
- prepare to use bear pepper spray

If the bear keeps advancing toward you

- Stand your ground
- Use your bear pepper spray (if the bear is close) or anything else you can find or use to threaten or distract the bear
- Fight back as if your life depends on it

If the bear attacks

- use your pepper spray
- fight back with everything you have — in a predatory attack, your life is at risk
- do not play dead except in the rare instance when you are sure a mother bear is attacking you in defense of cubs and your initial attempts to deter the bear have been unsuccessful (especially true for children or small-bodied adults)

After the bear leaves

- tell others about bear activity in the area
- if the bear was eating from a non-natural food source (like garbage or bird food), remove or secure the item that attracted the bear

Lethal force (dispatch a bear)

It's best to prevent encounters with bears before doing anything else.

But if you've exhausted all alternatives you have the right to protect your personal property and yourself. Any action you take must be:

- carried out using the most humane means possible
- done in a safe manner
- in accordance with any applicable laws (e.g., discharging a firearm by-laws)

You do not need a hunting licence to use lethal force. But if you kill a black bear and do not intend to keep it, you must **report it immediately** to your [local Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry office](#).

If you kill a black bear and want to keep the dead animal for personal use, you must [register for a Notice of Possession](#) with the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry.

Killing a bear in self-defence must be an action of last resort.