

**OUTDOORS**

Bears

Add Topic

Hiking or camping this summer? What to do if you encounter a bear.

Experts say you need to be "aware and prepared, not scared" of bears. So if you're going into the wild, buy some bear spray, forget the bear bells and never run if you see a grizzly or black bear.

**Lindsay Schnell**

USA TODAY

Published 7:35 a.m. ET July 10, 2023

Ah, summertime. The sunshine, the warm air, the thrill of camping and escaping technology, the fear of ... encountering a bear?

Let's be clear: Bear encounters, especially instances when a bear is aggressive toward a human, are extraordinarily rare. While attacks – like the one in June in Arizona, where a 66-year-old-man died – can make people fearful, experts stress that they are not at all common.

Still, there's a chance that you could cross paths with a bear while hiking or camping, and you want to be aware of what's going on and know what to do. There's plenty to read on these scenarios, including from the National Parks Service. Montana Grizzly Encounter, a grizzly rescue and education sanctuary in Bozeman, Montana, also keeps a cheat sheet of sorts on its website.

Lisa Upson is the executive director of People and Carnivores, a Montana-based nonprofit focused on preventing human-carnivore conflict. Upson has loved bears – grizzlies in particular – all her life, obsessed with "these captivating, mysterious, unbelievably intelligent creatures. They're beautiful, playful and represent the wild, which we're losing."

She understands news of bear attacks makes people worry. Her biggest piece of advice: Bears, especially grizzlies, should be respected (from a distance) and admired, but they don't need to be feared. Don't let trepidation about a potential bear encounter keep you from the outdoors.

"You need to be aware and prepared, not scared," Upson said.

Keep an eye out for animal carcasses

There's a helpful, catchy saying worth memorizing: "If it's black, fight back. If it's brown, lie down."

(The last part of that saying is not as commonly known: "If it's white, say goodnight" – which is to say, if you have some sort of aggressive encounter with a polar bear, you're probably a goner.)

The bottom line: You need to be aware of your surroundings, Upson said. That means always keeping an eye on the land around you, keeping your dog leashed and being on the lookout for animal carcasses, which a bear could be protecting as a food source.

"Bears' sense of smell is insane," Upson said. "What that means is that you should assume bears are around if you're out in the wilderness."

If you're hiking and see a carcass, report it to park rangers immediately.

Carry bear spray, travel in groups

Bear spray, which is basically a stronger version of pepper spray meant to be used from farther away, is a must. But having it buried in your pack isn't helpful if you suddenly encounter a charging bear. Keep it within reach, and know how to use it, especially if you can't see beyond about 40 feet.

If possible, travel and hike in groups of two to five. "The more human presence there is, the more noise you make, the less likely a bear will engage with you," Upson said.

If you're in a thick, forested area and can't see well, sing, clap or shout. Don't even bother purchasing bear bells – they're nearly impossible to hear unless you're within 10 feet, especially if there's wind. If you see a bear from a distance, detour as much as possible. Do not try to get closer to take a picture; the risk is not worth the Instagram likes.

Don't litter or keep your food out

If the bear sees you, move slowly. If you happen upon a bear at close range – especially a mom with cubs – don't make sudden movements. Back away slowly, all while observing its behavior. If it's huffing and puffing, waving its claws or pawing at the ground, those are all signs of aggression. It's warning you.

Years ago, Upson was on a solo camping trip when around 4 a.m., she heard noises outside her tent. She found a black bear with a 1- or 2-year-old cub, trying to get into her food.

She spent about 50 minutes "hazing these bears in the dark," she recalled, laughing. "It was fine, and I wasn't scared, because I could tell they weren't aggressive. Finally, to get them to go away, I had to run at them screaming with my bear spray. And then they left."

Do not litter or leave food out as you're hiking or camping. Food and garbage are the No. 1 attractants to a bear.

Do. Not. Run.

Let's say the unthinkable happens, and a bear charges you. Do not run. Upson said running can "activate" the bear, making them think you are prey. And even Usain Bolt couldn't outrun a grizzly, which can run up to 35 mph (Bolt ran the 100 meters at about 27 mph, for comparison).

Bears will sometimes do "bluff charges," which means they'll suddenly come to a stop. If a grizzly is about to make contact with you, get on the ground immediately and lie on your stomach. Keep your pack on for extra protection, and fold your arms over your neck and head, keeping your elbows on the ground. You want to keep the bear from rolling you over and exposing your stomach.

Resistance will provoke the bear, so lie still. You're essentially playing dead. Most likely, the bear will see you're immobilized and go away.

Bottom line: Respect bears

Grizzlies, Upson said, are amazing creatures. She is often in disbelief that she can go hiking or driving around her home in Helena, Montana, and see a grizzly or a black bear. And she wants others to experience their glory in their natural habitat – as long as they do so responsibly.

"Because the consequences can be so big, so disastrous, you need to take bears, and what they can do, seriously," she said. "But you also need to remember that a bear-on-human attack is less frequent than a lightning strike."