

Source - CNN: [How to survive a bear attack -- or better yet, avoid one altogether | CNN](#)

You're out for a hike on a crisp fall day. Suddenly, you spot a bear. And the bear has spotted you, too. Would you know what to do next?

Beth Pratt sure would.

She was once on the Old Gardiner Road Trail in Yellowstone National Park, enjoying her run in wild nature. Her reverie came to an end when she came upon a grizzly bear eating flowers.

"I stopped. It stood on its hind legs and looked at me. I knew that wasn't a threatening gesture," she told CNN Travel. "I'm not kidding, it waved its paw at me as if to say, 'just go on your way,' and went back to eating."

"And I walked slowly away and put some distance between us, and the encounter ended fine."

When it comes to dealing with bears, Pratt does have a thing or two on almost all the rest of us, though.

She is the California regional executive director for the National Wildlife Federation, a job she's had for more than 10 years. She worked in Yellowstone for several years – and once saw nine grizzlies in one day there.

Finally, she lives on the border of Yosemite National Park, and bears will pass through her yard, including this one seen in the footage above in late September 2021.

You can hear the enthusiasm in Pratt's voice as she shares her bear bona fides and advice to make sure bear/human encounters are delightful, not dangerous.

"A wild bear is a beautiful sight to see. It's incredible to see them in the wild. I never had a bad experience with bears. What I try to get people to feel is respect, not fear, for bears. The animal usually wants to avoid the encounters."

### **Feasts for beasts**

While it pays to be diligent at any time, autumn is a particularly good season to bone up on bear facts and safety when many bears are in a phase known as hyperphagia, Pratt said. "It's a period in the fall where bears are eating anything and everything to fatten up for hibernation."

She noted mountain lions are comparatively picky eaters. Not bears.

"They eat everything: Ants. Roadkill. Flowers. Nuts. And unfortunately, human food that's not secured. Our food is very attractive to them; it's easy calories."

Combine that with the fact that some national and state parks have become very popular and crowded, and you have a recipe for potential trouble.

"If more people are using public lands and more people are in the mix, there's more potential for encounters and conflict. It does concern me a little bit," Pratt said.

The key is being prepared – and that's where Pratt and others in the know come in.

### **First rule of 'bear fight club': Don't fight**

The best strategy is to never get in harm's way by enticing or provoking a wild bear. Trying to give a bear food or approaching cute cubs are particularly terrible ways to start an encounter. That's just looking for trouble.

The US National Park Service site points out each bear and each encounter is different, but there are general guidelines useful in most situations.

First of all, keep your distance if you happen upon a bear. Don't approach it, and give it plenty of room to walk away from you. Yellowstone tells you to stay at least 100 yards (300 feet or 91 meters) away; Shenandoah National Park in Virginia suggests 200 feet (61 meters) for its black bears.

You can run afoul of the law as well as the bears if you get too close and end up paying a fine.



Other tips:

- Talk calmly to yourself in low tones to identify yourself as human.
- Walk with a group (we're smellier and noisier in packs) and stay on designated trails.
- If you have a small child or dog, pick it up.
- Don't put yourself between cubs and their mother.
- Avoid direct eye contact and move away slowly, sideways if possible.

Pratt said don't be alarmed if a bear stands on its hind legs; it's not considered an aggressive move.

Almost all encounters are peaceful, Pratt said. Many times, people never knew they were even close to a bear, as in this YouTube video that shows two people emerging from a basement oblivious to a nearby bear.

### **What if a bear starts coming at you anyway?**

If a bear starts making assertive moves in your direction, you have important decisions to make – and fast. First thing is: Stand your ground with bears.

With either grizzlies (a subspecies of brown bears) or black bears, “please don’t run. Bears can outrun anybody,” Pratt said. “Don’t climb a tree either. They can also climb trees better than you.”

New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection Division of Fish and Wildlife (where the black bear population is growing) also has some tips:

- Make loud noises by yelling, banging pots and pans or using an airhorn to scare bears away.
- Make yourself look as large as possible by waving your arms.
- If you’re with other people, stay together.

Pratt said you can usually intimidate or bluff your way out of sticky bear situations, depending on the bear species and the situation.

### **But what if a bear is about to attack?**

You’re now in the rarest of situations – you’ve attracted a bear’s attention. It didn’t move off. It’s started coming at you aggressively and fast. You think you’re about to be attacked. What’s next?

One very crucial thing is to make a quick ID of the kind of bear, because your strategy is going to be different depending on the type of bear.

If it’s a black bear, the NPS and Pratt have a clear message: Do not run. Do not play dead.



“You want to stand your ground with black bears. Look as intimidating as possible,” Pratt said. “Throw things not at it but near it. Make that black bear intimidated by you. Let it know you are a big person. Pick something up; yell at it. If it attacks, fight back – aim for the face.”

### **It’s a different situation with grizzlies**

If you’re dealing with a grizzly that won’t back off and an attack is imminent, you’re advised to do the opposite. You should play dead.

“Act as unthreatening as possible with a grizzly. Play dead with a grizzly if it starts to attack,” Pratt said. “Tuck and cover. Get into a fetal position. Wrap your hands around your neck. Lay on your stomach. Once you do that, 99 percent of the time the grizzly will move on.”

'I was up to my waist down a hippo's throat.' He survived, and here's his advice

NPS elaborates: “Remain still until the bear leaves the area. Fighting back usually increases the intensity of such attacks. However, if the attack persists, fight back vigorously.”

Fighting back a grizzly bear is the last resort – “your Hail Mary pass” as Pratt called it – when all other options are out.

An exception to this rule: If you’re camping in a tent and are attacked, that bear likely sees you as food. NPS and Pratt say this is a time to fight.

### **How do you tell a black bear from a grizzly?**

First off, know your area and read up on the bears there.

In North America, grizzlies have a much more limited range than black bears do. In the Lower 48, they are in Washington, Montana, Idaho and Wyoming. And then in Alaska, too. They also cover large parts of western Canada.

Black bears have more territory. They can be found in as many as 40 US states, much of Canada and even parts of northern Mexico, the National Wildlife Federation says.

So say you’re in Quebec, the Appalachians, the Ozarks, California or even parts of Florida, that’s going to be a black bear. But if you’re in Yellowstone or Glacier National Park, for instance, that could be a black bear or a grizzly. That’s when it’s crucial to know how to make a quick visual ID.

You can’t go by the color of the fur. Black bears can be black, brown, cinnamon, blond, blue-gray or white, according to Bear.org.



One of the best ways to tell the difference, Pratt said, is to look for a hump at the shoulders. Grizzlies have them. Black bears don't.

She also said the face shapes are different. "Black bear faces look a little more cuddly to me, a little rounder, with a straight nose. A grizzly bear face looks more like a wild predator and has a dish shape."

This NPS webpage has more helpful ways to tell the differences.

Fun facts: Eight bear species can be found all over the world – from tropical Sri Lanka to the frigid reaches of Russia, Norway and Canada. And European websites such as Bear Watching Slovenia give many of the same safety tips as North Americans get.

### **Bear spray and weapons**

Some people like to carry bear spray and/or a weapon with them when venturing into bear country.

Pratt is an advocate of the former and says be sure to practice using it first before going into the wild. NPS has a helpful video and tips on using spray to ward off bears.

She's more cautious about bringing firearms with you, especially if you're inexperienced. "Taking a grizzly out with one shot would be tough. You need to be very experienced with a gun to increase your chance of safety."

A Brigham Young University study in 2008 found spray more effective than a firearm. And spray doesn't permanently harm a bear.

Some people like to carry bear bells on their hikes, hoping the noise will ward off the animals. But the park service says that "Yelling, clapping and talking are more effective ways of alerting a bear to your presence."

## **What campers need to know?**



If you're taking your vehicle for an overnight camping trip, don't store food in it.

If you're out camping overnight, you have extra considerations to take.

Kyle Patterson, management specialist and public affairs officer at Rocky Mountain National Park, emailed CNN Travel some ways to keep hungry bears away.

Patterson advised using a food storage locker if provided in campgrounds and picnic areas. Also, "avoid storing food and coolers in your vehicle. If you must, store food in airtight containers in the trunk or out of sight. Close vehicle windows completely."

National Park adventures: Best parks to get your thrills

Other tips and cautions:

- Don't store food in tents or pop-up campers in campgrounds or in vehicles at trailheads.
- Don't leave food, coolers and dirty cookware unattended. Park rangers may confiscate them and cite you.
- Get rid of garbage in bear-resistant dumpsters and trash cans.

Human-fed bears usually end up as chronic problems and need to be removed, Patterson said. "A fed bear is a dead bear."

**The ball is in our court**

Pratt emphasized it's up to humans to be responsible to these creatures.

"The bears are just being bears. We are way more of a threat to them. Bear attacks are so rare. And fatalities are even rarer," she said.

"The bears' lives are more at threat than ours in encounters. I want people to have magical, wonderful experiences in the wild. I want people to feel OK about having these encounters."