

Encounters with Grizzlies

Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee

In the Field

If you encounter a bear, there are actions you can take to avoid escalating the situation. Maintaining a safe distance and acting in a manner that does not threaten the bear provides options for you and the bear. If you encounter a grizzly, you should first try to back out of the situation. Keep calm, avoid direct eye contact, back up slowly, and speak in a soft monotone. Never turn your back on the bear and never kneel. Most encounters end with the bear leaving at this point.

Never run, and do not climb a tree unless you have time to climb at least ten feet before the bear reaches you. Remember, bears can run very fast. If you do have to climb, you might want to drop a non-food item, such as a camera, to distract the bear while you climb. If the bear charges, stand your ground. Bears often “mock charge” or run past you. The bear may charge you several times before leaving the area. Shooting a bear when it is charging is not recommended. The bear almost always lives long enough to maul the shooter severely. As a last resort, play dead. Curl into a ball, covering your neck and head with your hands and arms. If you have a backpack, leave it on as it will help protect your back. If the bear swats you, roll with it. Stay in a tucked position and do not try to look at the bear until you are sure it is gone. Many people have survived bear attacks using this tactic.

In Camp

Bears that come into your camp are a completely different situation. They have chosen to approach you and have most likely become habituated to human food and garbage. These bears are more dangerous because they are no longer avoiding confrontations with humans. It is important that you store your food properly. If the bear does not get a food reward, it will be more likely to leave quickly.

Stay calm, avoid direct eye contact and speak to the bear. Get to safety as quickly as possible by slowly backing out of the area while looking for suitable trees to climb. Climb a tree as high as you can since some grizzlies can climb trees. Stay in the tree until you are sure the bear is gone. If the bear attacks you, fight back by punching, slapping or using any object available for a weapon. Try to evade the bear by climbing up a tree or onto a boulder. Playing dead will NOT work in this situation. The bear has made a conscious choice to attack you. Before retiring for the night, note climbable trees in the area. Sleep in tents large enough to stack gear between you and the tent wall. If a bear attempts to enter your tent, there are spray repellants marketed for bear confrontations that may be useful. Always report any bear incident as soon as possible, even one that just walks through a campsite.

Grizzly Bear Behavior

The bear that stands on his hind feet is investigating an unknown situation. *This is not an aggressive posture.* It simply means that the bear is unsure of what is in front of him. By standing on its hind feet it can get a better look and smell, and thus can better identify whatever is in front of him. A bear that swings its head from side to side, or presents a side view of its body, is expressing a reluctance to charge. It is looking for a way out of the situation. If the bear looks at you directly and has its ears back, it is warning you that you are too close and it feels threatened. The bear may make a barking, woofing or moaning sound to further indicate its distress.

If the bear “pops” its jaws, the bear is very agitated and likely to charge. Charges are often a test of your resolve and are often “mock charges” where the bear stops short of you, veers off or runs past you. A bear may mock charge many times before leaving. A bear that does charge and knocks you down is attempting to remove a threat. The bear will use as much force as it believes is necessary to remove that threat. This is why lying down and playing dead is often the best thing to do in an attack situation.



Figure 2.51: Grizzly sow with cubs. *Source: U.S. Forest Service*