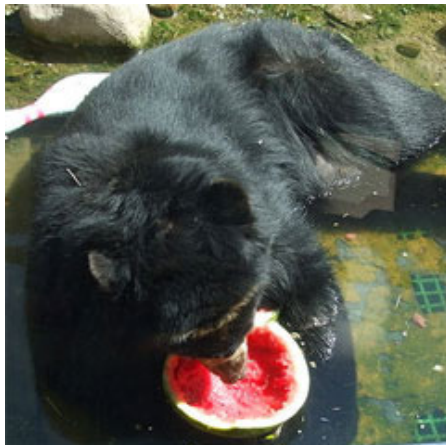




5 TIPS FOR SAFE CAMPING IN BLACK BEAR COUNTRY

by Dakota McCoy, SCA Yosemite Bear Management Intern



1) Store your food/trash properly.

I can't stress this one enough! If you are planning to go on a day hike in black bear country, make sure that no visible food is left in your car. If you have a cooler, cover it up. Never leave a cooler in the bed of your truck. Believe it or not, bears that have become habituated are actually familiar with what a cooler is. At night, make sure no food or toiletries are stored in your vehicle. That includes toothpaste, chapstick, and canned and bottled drinks. Yes, bears can actually smell through sealed cans/bottles! Biting down on a metal/glass can or bottle is bad for a bear's teeth so please, store all of your attractants safely in your food locker! So far this summer, I've seen bears eat citronella candles, destroy a bicycle seat with chapstick stored in the seat pouch, and break into numerous cars. Don't let this happen to you!

2) When heading into the backcountry, make sure to travel with a bear canister.

A bear canister may not be the lightest addition to your already heavy load, and its oblong shape can be a little awkward in your pack, but waking up to find that a bear (or other animal) has eaten ALL of your food can really ruin your 3-day hike through the backcountry. Not only does such a situation put you in danger, but by giving a once wild bear its first taste of human food, you're conditioning this bear to keep coming back for more. Plus, if a backcountry NPS Ranger passes you on the trail without a bear canister, it can lead to a hefty fine.



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3) Make sure your bear locker is latched properly.

There are many models of bear locker and each operates a little differently, so make sure you are latching yours correctly. Black bears are extremely intelligent animals, and if you do not use the locker the way it was designed to function, it's not unlikely that a bear will figure out how to break into it. If it's Yosemite that you're planning to visit, check out this list of backcountry campgrounds where bear lockers are available, as well as instructions on how to use your locker properly.

4) If you are lucky enough to see a black bear, keep your distance.

With the number of people that visit black bear country each year, it can be a struggle to manage human/wildlife conflict. Really, you should make sure to keep your distance from all wildlife that you encounter, but most especially bears! Not only can bears harm you if they feel startled or cornered, but frequent close encounters with curious humans can easily lead to habituation. If you are in a developed zone, such as a picnic area or a campground, and you see a black bear approaching you or your food, yell at it! Bang pots and pans, and make yourself appear big. Black bears are generally scared of humans, so making yourself appear bigger and scarier than they are will most likely scare them away. If the situation allows it, try not to abandon your food. Leaving your food for a black bear to enjoy rewards the bear for approaching humans and developed areas. When a bear obtains such food rewards multiple times, it can lead to more aggressive behavior in subsequent attempts to attain food from human visitors.



5) Drive the speed limit!

Many speed limits are designated with wildlife in mind, especially on roads running through parks and other public lands. Follow them; don't abuse them. Use caution, especially while driving at night. Over 20 bears a year are injured or killed from collisions with motor vehicles in Yosemite National Park alone. Since starting work three months ago, I have already had to respond to multiple bears being hit by cars! It is one of the saddest parts of the job. Have you ever been to Yosemite and seen a "Red Bear Dead Bear" sign? For every place in the park where a bear has been hit by a car, we place a "Red Bear Dead Bear" sign reminding visitors to slow down and use caution when driving. Just remember, the bears were here first, we are just visiting!

Many bear-vehicle collisions each year occur on Tioga Road. Be sure to always use caution while driving and do not exceed the speed limits!

By following these steps, you can help keep America's black bears wild in Yosemite and beyond. After all, it's managing the behavior of humans that actually helps protect bears, much more so than managing the behavior of the bears themselves.

"Not everybody gets the chance to see a bear, but everybody gets the chance to save a bear."

-- Rachel Mazur, Branch Chief of Wildlife, Visitor Use, and Social Science, Yosemite National Park.



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