



SKGABC Wildlife Primer

The SKGABC asks all guides to follow our Low-Impact Guidelines to avoid negative human / wildlife interactions:

<http://skgabc.com/low-impact.php>

The SKGABC wildlife primer serves to educate sea kayak guides on best practices when working in bear, cougar, and wolf habitat.

Disclaimer: The SKGABC has consulted with National Parks staff and a University professor who specializes in human wildlife interactions in the creation of this document. The information contained in this primer is meant to be a tool to better inform guides and is not meant as the definitive source on large carnivores and their behaviour. It is assumed that all guides will keep a tidy camp and possess a general understanding of how to behave in natural environment and reduce the risks in human/carnivore interactions.

Cougar and Wolf Introductory Information:

Coastal British Columbia has both wolves and cougars. As a result of clear cut logging practices deer habitat has been reduced or changed over time. This in turn has reduced deer populations and caused cougars and wolves to hunt a variety of smaller prey located in shoreline areas when their main food source (deer) are not available. There has been a common perception that wolves and cougars are scared of people and that just the presence of people prevented close encounters. That perception has changed and some wolves and cougars have adapted to hunt where human use is high (example: beaches, mudflat edges, and coastal trails) and newly disturbed edge habitat (example: new subdivisions) in and around communities. This increased level of interaction between carnivore and humans has increased the risk associated with both wolves and cougars. Some wolves and cougars have developed a striking lack of wariness towards people.

Signs of Aggressive Behaviour (Cougar and Wolf):

- Seeing these animals at close range could be a sign of aggressive behaviour
- Both species generally fear humans and if they sitting and watching your camp you might have a problem
- With cougars: ears forward, crouching down low to the ground, tail twitching, moving forward low to the ground, hiding and watching at close range (within 50m)
- With wolves: behaviour exhibits a boldness around people, wolves in camp or exploring your camp at night and stealing clothes, gear, and looking for food, this kind of behaviour could occur for weeks or months before an incident (example: Vargas Isl and Algonquin attacks)

Factors Influencing Cougar Attacks (not very much information on wolf attacks):

- A untidy camp complete with food, garbage, pet food, dish rags, soap, pots, and toiletries left in the open
- The addition of children to a commercial trip could increase the risk of cougar attack
- Single person hiking or moving around camp outside of the larger group could be at increased risk
- Small dogs and other pets are an attractant for cougars and increase the risk of a human/cougar incidents

Additional Interesting Information for Guides

- In Beier's (1991) analysis of cougar attacks, most victims (66%) were unsupervised children or lone adults.
- Solitary people were three times as likely as groups to be attacked by a cougar (Fitzhugh et al. (2003).
- Groups of 5 or more seemed relatively secure from cougar attack. Attacks on large groups typically involved children.
- In a review of 16 fatal and 92 non-fatal attacks by Fitzhugh et al (2003), result indicate that repeated and prolonged noise was found to be more effective than gunshots.
- Yelling, screaming and charging seemed effective, and in 6 cases the victim either charged and fought with the cougar or made mock lunges at it. In all 6 cases the cougar backed down or left the area. Fitzhugh et al (2003)

What to Do Around an Aggressive Cougar

- Never run or turn your back on a cougar
- Always watch the cougar and know where it is and
- Give the cougar room to escape
- Pick up nearby children and small pets
- Raise your arms to make yourself look bigger
- Show the cougar your teeth and threaten it (yes, different than a bear encounter)
- Act aggressively, and if possible, throw rocks or sticks at the cougar
- Run at the cougar and try to scare it off but don't get close enough that it could swipe at you
- If contact takes place, fight back and don't play dead. Try to injure its eyes and damage its nose...might be a good job for the assistant guide!

Bears (Grizzly and Black Bear) Introductory Information:

British Columbia has both black bears and grizzly bears. Haida Gwaii, Vancouver Island and the surrounding southern Gulf Islands have only black bears. Interestingly enough northern Vancouver Island has had the odd grizzly bear swim across from the mainland. This is interesting because perhaps in the future we will have more grizzly bears living on Vancouver Island. Both grizzly and black bears are found on the mainland coast, and if guiding in the arctic polar bears are present. Polar bears are not discussed in this document.

Signs of Aggressive Behaviour:

- Ears back, eyes focused, 'the look'
- Hair erect on back and neck
- Head down, neck stretch, mouth open, canines (upper teeth) showing, jawing
- Huffing, woofing, growling, roaring
- Approaches you or your group and gains higher ground
- Exhaling through nostrils equals excited
- Charges with ground swatting

Factors Influencing Bear Attacks:

- Food distribution is a primary factor influencing seasonal movements of bears within home ranges
- Avalanche chutes, stream bottoms, wet meadows, burns, and estuaries produce highest value vegetation and humans encountering bears at close range in these choice habitats can produce conflict. Even several hundred metres away (Herrero, 1978).
- Close encounters between humans and bears can produce sudden burst of violence toward a perceived human threat.
- Sows with cubs seek remote rugged terrain tend to avoid large male bears and wolves. A sow's protective space is large and can be over 100 metres.
- Sow Grizzly bears strategy when threatened is to identify the threat, charge, engage, neutralize the threat, and retreat with the cubs
- Sow black bears could exhibit the same response as the grizzly sow above but much more common would be for the sow and her cubs to quickly climb a nearby tree
- When bears are frequently observed people the bears begin to mute their responses and conserve energy.
- Bears that have been habituated seek easily accessed food sources and can be a serious threat to humans.
- Each bear encounter is unique, think fast and react to what is happening. The best deterrence is to avoid close encounters.

Additional Interesting Information for Guides

- Sow grizzlies with cubs are volatile at close range – she may charge, contact and hurt you badly
- Black bears, especially males in the northern interior may be predaceous
- Don't fight a sow grizzly
- Fight a predaceous black bear
- From 1986 to 2005 (20 year duration) within BC, grizzlies killed 6 and injured 63 people
- Black bears have killed 7 and injured 59 people
- This works out to be a yearly average of 0.3 people killed, 3.2 injured by grizzlies; and 0.4 people killed, 3.0 injured by black bears
- 1 person killed by a black bear every 3 years – same for grizzlies - fairly low threat, but still a concern for people and for the bears
- Many black bear attacks that result in death tend to be prolonged and predaceous in nature

Bear Spray vs Firearms as Protection for Aggressive Bears

- Bear spray recommended as first line of defence during bear aversion process
- Bear spray limits concern for line of fire accidents as opposed to a firearm.
- Research shows that using firearms as bear defense increases the chance of injury to people and the bears
- Herrero (1978) suggests that the chance of serious injury to people more than doubles when shots are fired, compared to when spray is used without shooting
- USFWS, 2005: firearms used as grizzly defense increased personal injury 50% more often than those using bear spray. Users of bear spray escaped personal injury most of the time and of those injured they were less serious and attacks were of shorter duration
- Bear bangers are another option for bear aversion. However, guides should practice the use of bangers as a poorly deployed banger could complicate a bear/human interaction.