



# The BearSmart Guide

to Playing Safely in Bear and Cougar Country

*Alberta* 



Environment and Parks, Government of Alberta

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The BearSmart Guide to Playing Safely in Bear Territory

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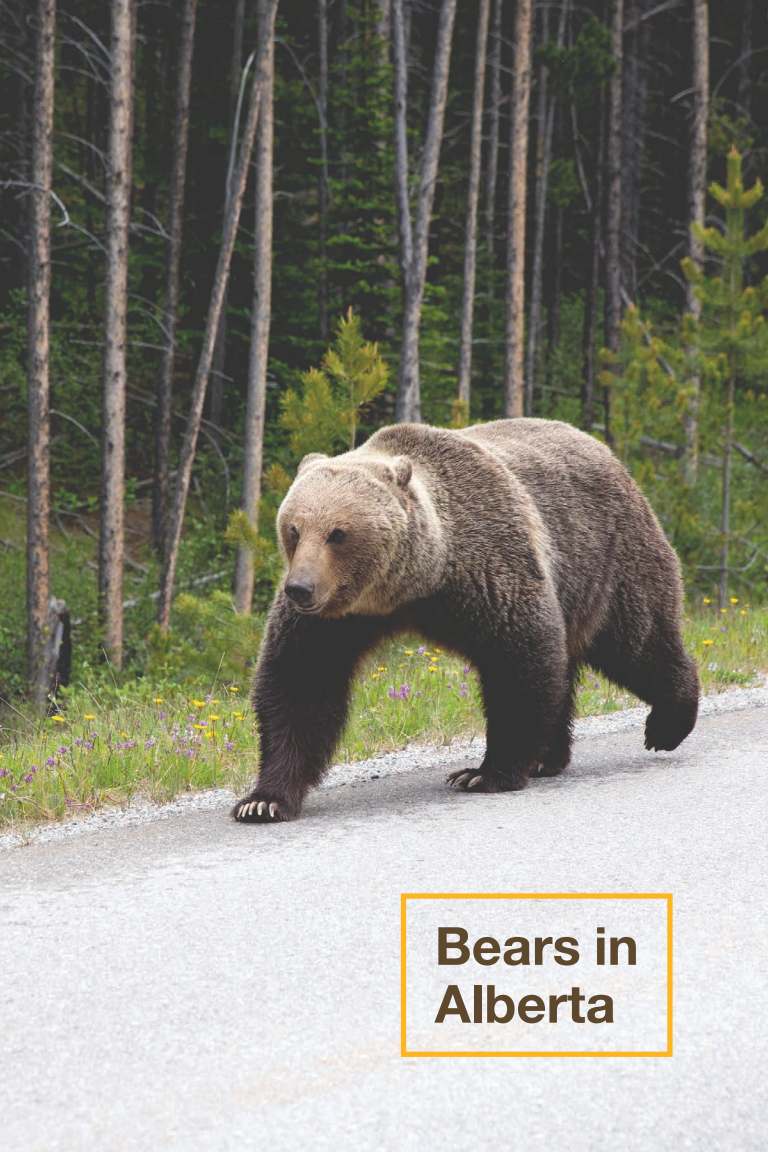
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## **Bears in Alberta**

## WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT ALBERTA BEARS

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### The bear necessities

- In the spring, summer and fall bears need to eat enough to survive winter, when they spend between four and six months in their dens.
- Bears can consume up to 25,000 calories a day. Most of their diet is actually low in calories—the natural diet of a bear is 85 to 90 per cent plants and berries and 10 to 15 per cent insects and mammals. This means they must eat a lot, and often.
- Bears use their intelligence, curiosity and keen sense of smell to seek out new food sources.
- Bears will overcome their natural wariness of people to take advantage of the easy meals we provide when we carelessly store our food, garbage or pet food. These are “human-habituated” bears..
- Bears have good memories. They remember where to access food and how. In human-use places they can apply these skills to get food from fruit trees, containers, vehicles or buildings.
- Human food can be irresistible to bears. Bears that are rewarded with food when they access human-use places can become “food-conditioned.”

## **The problem with food-conditioned bears**

Bears will consume any food they can find, even if the food is found in a human-use place or is not a natural part of bear's diet. Once bears learn to associate humans and human-use places with easy, high-calorie meals, they become food-conditioned. It is difficult to prevent these bears from seeking out human food sources in the future.

Everyone hiking, camping, fishing or cycling in bear country has a role to play in preventing Alberta's bears from becoming food-conditioned.

**Be BearSmart:** store your food and garbage where bears can't get to them.

## **If a bear is food-conditioned, why not just relocate it?**

In some cases, bears that have learned to find food in human-use places will be moved to other locations. Relocating a food-conditioned bear may offer enough time to remove the food or other items that had first attracted the bear. However, this is not a long-term solution.

Relocation is hard on the bear, lowers its chance of survival and places a heavy demand on human and financial resources. Once relocated, bears often continue seeking out human foods or return to the original location.

**The best way to solve the problem of a food-conditioned bear is to not create one in the first place.**



## Grizzly Bears:

- 1 have a shoulder hump
- 2 may have silver or light-tipped guard hairs on their head, hump and back, giving them that “grizzled” look
- 3 have ears that are rounded and appear smaller overall
- 4 have claws that are usually light-coloured and long (about 7.5 cm to 10 cm long)
- 5 leave tracks with toe pads set in a relatively straight line and claw imprints 5 cm to 7.5 cm in front of the toe pads
- 6 have a pig-like facial profile with less peripheral vision





## Black Bears:

- 1 have no hump between their shoulders
- 2 appear more uniform in colour than grizzlies
- 3 have more pointed or noticeable ears
- 4 have claws that are usually black and relatively short (about 2.5 cm long)
- 5 leave tracks with toe pads that form a noticeable arc, and claw imprints that are often not visible or much closer to the toe pads
- 6 have a straighter facial profile with greater peripheral vision



## HOW TO PREVENT TROUBLE WITH BEARS: BEING BEARSMART WHEN HIKING, CAMPING, FISHING OR CYCLING

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Heading into bear country?

Take friends or family—it's safer to travel in groups. Before you leave, agree on a plan for dealing with wildlife encounters.

### See the signs

Remember that bears are so focused on eating and protecting their young that they may not be diligent in avoiding people. The responsibility to prevent human-bear encounters is on the humans in bear country.

Don't wear headphones or anything else that may interfere with your ability to detect nearby wildlife.

Watch for signs of bear activity. If the signs you see look fresh, leave the area, watching for the bear until you've reached a place of safety.

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Grizzly bear  
track



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Bear scat full  
of vegetation,  
a common  
food source in  
spring and early  
summer

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Crows, ravens or  
magpies – may  
be lingering  
over an animal  
carcass that a  
bear could be  
feeding on





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Black bear track

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Bear scat full of  
buffaloberries,  
a common food  
source in late  
summer



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Dug-up ant hill



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A rolled rock –  
left by a bear  
trying to get at  
the bugs and  
grubs that live  
underneath

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A carcass,  
covered by earth



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Dogwood, bent  
by bears eating  
the berries  
from it

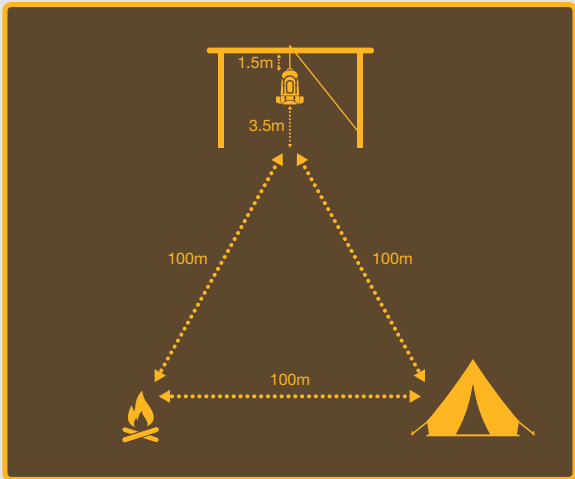
## **Always be BearSmart**

If you're hiking, cycling or fishing in bear territory, it's always time to be BearSmart. There are some times and places though, that bear encounters are more likely:

- When noise levels are high because of running water, wind or heavy rain.
- At dusk, night or dawn.
- Where sightlines are short because of heavy cover, bends in trails, or when approaching hills.
- When you pass through berry patches where bears might be feeding.

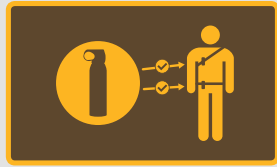
## **BearSmart camping**

- Choose your campsite wisely. Set up camp away from the places bears use as travel corridors or food sources, like rivers, lakeshores, shrubs or berry patches.
- Pick campsites that have good lines of sight. This will allow you and the bear to see each other before a close encounter happens.
- Arrange tents, trailers and vehicles so there is enough room between them for a visiting bear to make a quick and easy escape.
- Don't bring food, toiletries or the clothes you wore when cooking or fishing into your tent. Store them in bear-resistant containers, a bear-proof locker or at least 100 meters away from where you are sleeping.
- Store garbage in bear-resistant containers and pack it out.



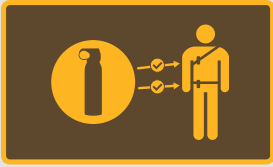
- Never abandon, bury or partially burn food scraps. Bears will be able to smell the lingering food odours. Burn scraps completely to ashes.
- Be cautious when moving around the camp at night. Carry your flashlight and bear spray and make enough noise to alert visiting wildlife of your presence.
- If possible, secure the perimeter of your camp by setting up an electric fence.
- Use canned or dried foods—they have less odour.
- Cooking and cleaning should also be done at least 100 meters away from your tent. Wash cooking equipment immediately and dispose of dishwater 100 meters away from your campsite.





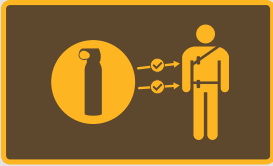
## BearSmart Hiking

- Make noise. A loud shout every few minutes is more effective than bear bells.
- Carry bear spray in a belt or chest holster. Be sure you know how to use it.
- Travel in groups, and keep children in between the adults. Don't let anyone fall behind or run ahead.
- Keep your dogs on leash, or consider leaving them at home. Dogs have been known to make bear encounters worse.



## **BearSmart Cycling**

- Carry bear spray in a belt or chest holster and know how to use it.
- The speed and quiet of a bicycle increase the potential for a bear encounter. Make as much noise as you can and be extra cautious when coming up to blind corners or through areas with berry patches where bears might be feeding.



## BearSmart Fishing

- Carry bear spray in a belt or chest holster and know how to use it.
- If leaving the beaten path to find your favourite fishing spot, make noise, and be watchful for the animals that may be using the bush as cover.
- Remember that in the wild, lakes, rivers, and streams are relatively high-traffic areas. Both humans and wildlife use them in the same way: for food, water and as travel corridors. Also remember that humans and wildlife may have a more difficult time hearing the signs warning of the other's approach, as the flowing water can be loud.
- Stay near your friends and keep an eye on them.
- Seal your catch in a plastic bag and clean the fish away from your camp.

## BEAR ENCOUNTERS

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### You see a bear, so now what?

All bears are individuals, so each bear encounter will be unique. Serious attacks are rare, but you must always be BearSmart when in the wild.

All bears have a “personal space” and feel threatened when this space is invaded. How they react to the threat is not always predictable and will depend on the situation at hand and the character of the individual bear.

When you see a bear, the most important things to remember are:

- **Do not run.**
- Stay close to those you're with.
- Watch the bear and respond to what it's doing.
- Never offer the bear food.



## **WHAT IS THE BEAR DOING?**

It's walking, in the distance.

## **WHY IS THE BEAR DOING THAT?**

It's minding its own business.

## **WHAT SHOULD YOU DO?**

- Don't provoke the bear. Move away cautiously, watching for a change in the bear's behaviour.



## **WHAT IS THE BEAR DOING?**

It's in the distance, but it sees you and has started to move towards you.

## **WHY IS THE BEAR DOING THAT?**

It may be curious. Normally bears move away when they realize that people are nearby.

## **WHAT SHOULD YOU DO?**

- Use your noisemaker. First make sure the surroundings are clear of people and the bear has an obvious way out. A bear that's been startled by a noisemaker may not be able to avoid groups of people as it flees the area.
- Use your air horn or bear banger. Keep in mind that if the bear has heard such a noise before, it may continue to approach. Bears that are initially scared away may later return.
- Prepare your bear spray.



## **WHAT IS THE BEAR DOING?**

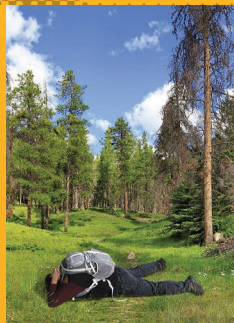
It's standing up in response to a new sound, sight or smell.

## **WHY IS THE BEAR DOING THAT?**

To get a better smell/look at what's happening in its surroundings.

## **WHAT SHOULD YOU DO?**

- Let the bear know that you're not a threat and not a prey animal. Speak calmly, wave your arms slowly, back away to a place of safety.



## **WHAT IS THE BEAR DOING?**

The bear is making a bluff charge. Similar displays of agitation or aggression include swatting the ground, woofing or popping their jaws.

## **WHY IS THE BEAR DOING THAT?**

This is a defensive bear. It may be defending its cubs, food, territory or itself. It wants you to leave.

Both species of bear are capable of this type of behaviour, but research shows that it is more common in grizzlies.

## **WHAT SHOULD YOU DO?**

- Let the bear know that you're not a threat. Speak calmly, wave your arms slowly, back away to a place of safety.
- If the bear makes contact, slowly lower yourself to the ground, lie on your belly, lace your fingers around your neck and anchor your toes into the ground.
- If the bear continues to bite after two minutes, start fighting back. The encounter may have turned predatory.





## **WHAT IS THE BEAR DOING?**

It's silent and staring intently, head lowered, ears forward. It may follow you even after you've warned it.

## **WHY IS THE BEAR DOING THAT?**

This is an offensive bear. It may be a curious, food-conditioned, human-habituated, a juvenile that is testing its limits, or assessing whether you are, or have, food.

Both species of bear are capable of this type of behaviour, but studies show it is more common in black bears.

## **WHAT SHOULD YOU DO?**

- Let this bear know that you are not prey. Make noise and throw rocks and sticks. Prepare to use your bear spray.

## **The bear continues to approach you. It's time to use your bear spray.**

Bear spray is a proven deterrent, but you must know how to use it, and keep it on you in a belt or chest holster, not in your back pack or on your bike or ATV.

- Do not run. Bring your group together.
- Prepare to use your bear spray by removing the safety clip.
- Evaluate the wind direction. Strong winds will affect your spray distance and direction. If possible, rotate so the wind is at your back.
- Speak in a calm voice.
- Attempt to leave the area slowly, backtracking on your route to where you came in, without turning your back to the bear.
- Remove the canister from the holster. Hold the canister with both hands.
- Aim low in front of the bear at its eyes, nose, and mouth.
- When the bear is as close as four metres away (up to 13 feet) fire one- to two-second blasts in continuous succession, aiming just below the head, or into the nose and mouth of the bear until the bear leaves.
- If it's windy, bear spray may be blown in your direction.
- Be prepared to move out of the bear's way.
- Spray and react. Re-evaluate your situation.
- Be ready to spray more than once.
- When the attack is interrupted, retreat. Do not run.

Do not turn your back on the bear or try to chase the bear.

- As the bear leaves, do not follow it. Go in a different direction, or leave in the direction you came.



# BEAR DETERRENTS 101: THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT BEAR SPRAY AND NOISE MAKERS

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## 1. BEAR SPRAY

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The most important source of information is the label on the side of the bear spray canister. Refer to the label for instructions on the use and storage of your bear spray.

### Does it work?

- Bear deterrent vendors cannot guarantee 100 per cent success with their product. However, in a study of Alaskan bear encounters, it was found that 98 per cent of those who used bear spray were uninjured by the bear. The remaining two per cent received only minor injuries that required no hospitalization.
- Compared to a firearm, bear spray is more effective at interrupting a bear attack and using it reduces the chance of injury to you, the bear and those you're with.
- The active ingredient in bear spray is oleoresin capsicum, which irritates the eyes, nose and lungs, causing severe but temporary eye irritation and difficulty breathing.

- Bear spray is effective at deterring other types of wildlife such as cougars.
- You must always be alert, diligent and prepared. Being BearSmart can prevent unwanted encounters from happening in the first place. Bear spray should be your last resort in responding to an encounter.

### **ShopSmart—buying bear spray**

- Be sure the canister is labelled “for deterring bear attacks” or “bear deterrent”.
- The canister should weigh at least 225 grams (7.9 ounces).
- Check the canister’s expiry date and replace it when necessary.
- Be sure to purchase a belt or chest holster to carry your bear spray. It’s best to purchase a holster that closes across the top so the canister doesn’t slip out.
- After making your purchase, remove the cable ties that keep the safety clip in place. If you forget to remove the cable ties, they will prevent you from removing the safety clip during a bear encounter.

### **Practice, practice, practice**

Always read the information on the canister label to learn the specific spray range and duration of your product. Be sure to follow all instructions closely. Practice and be familiar with your can and holster combination.

- Practice reaching for your spray until you can retrieve it quickly. Practicing until you can retrieve your spray without thinking will help you respond effectively in a bear encounter.

- The best option is to practice with an inert canister, which has the same spraying power but not the hot pepper ingredient. If you practice with a new canister, you will use up some of the spray you may need in a bear encounter.
- Each canister of bear spray has a limited duration of bear spray, generally up to eight seconds. Read the label on your canister to find out how many seconds of spray yours contains.
- Take an in-person bear spray training course.

### **Storing bear spray**

Keep the canister away from items that could crush or puncture it.

- Never leave the canister in direct sunlight or anywhere temperatures can become very hot or very cold, such as in your vehicle.
- When driving, store the bear spray canister in a travel container. Once you've arrived, do not keep the bear spray in your vehicle. The variations in temperature can damage the canister.
- Bear spray cannot be transported on commercial airlines.

### **First aid if you're accidentally sprayed**

- Anyone who's been accidentally sprayed should be moved from the contaminated area to fresh air as quickly as possible.
- Wash your hands and flush exposed skin with cold water and soap. Mild, non-oil-based soaps such as baby soaps are best.

- Do not rub exposed areas. Pat dry with a towel.
- To flush spray out of your eyes, place your head under water and open your eyes every few seconds. Do not rub your eyes. Remove contacts lenses.
- Do not apply lotions or creams to the exposed areas for at least 24 hours.
- If the effects of the spray do not dissipate in 30 to 45 minutes, seek medical attention.

## 2. NOISEMAKERS

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The most effective noisemaker in bear country is you. Talking or singing



loudly can help prevent surprise encounters with wildlife. With enough warning of your approach, wildlife typically remove themselves and their young from the area.

### Types of noisemakers

- **Air horns** are easily carried in bear country. They create a loud, piercing sound of more than 120 decibels.
- **Banger cartridges** are available for pen or pistol-launchers, .22 calibre launchers and 12-gauge

launchers. They travel 20 to 100 meters (66 to 328 feet) then create a loud bang.

- **Screamers** are similar to bangers except that they create a loud, continuous screeching noise for approximately 100 meters (328 feet). Their flight pattern is erratic, so be extremely cautious when using them.

**What about bear bells?** Bear bells seem like a cheap and easy bear deterrent option, but likely don't make enough noise to actually alert wildlife to your arrival. If you choose to carry bear bells, remember that it's essential to be BearSmart in all other ways.

## Using noisemakers

- Use noisemakers to scare away bears that are aware of your presence but do not leave the area.
- Do not use bangers or screamers in dry forest conditions. They can cause a fire. When aiming the noise deterrent, aim at the sky. Do not shoot it directly at the bear. Ensure it explodes between you and the bear. A noise deterrent that explodes behind the bear may startle it so the bear runs up in your direction.
- Be prepared to defend yourself with bear spray in case the noisemaker doesn't deter the bear.

## Noisemaker safety

- Noisemakers that fire banger or screamer cartridges should be stored and carried unloaded.
- Always be aware of the line of fire.



- Be aware of the potential for ricochet.
- Never point or fire a noisemaker projectile at a person or an animal. This can cause injury or even death.
- Ensure you are not using bangers or screamers that are old, or that have been wet or in any way altered. They may explode prematurely and hurt someone.
- Launchers must be stored in a clean location to prevent dirt from obstructing the launch point.

### 3. ELECTRIC FENCING

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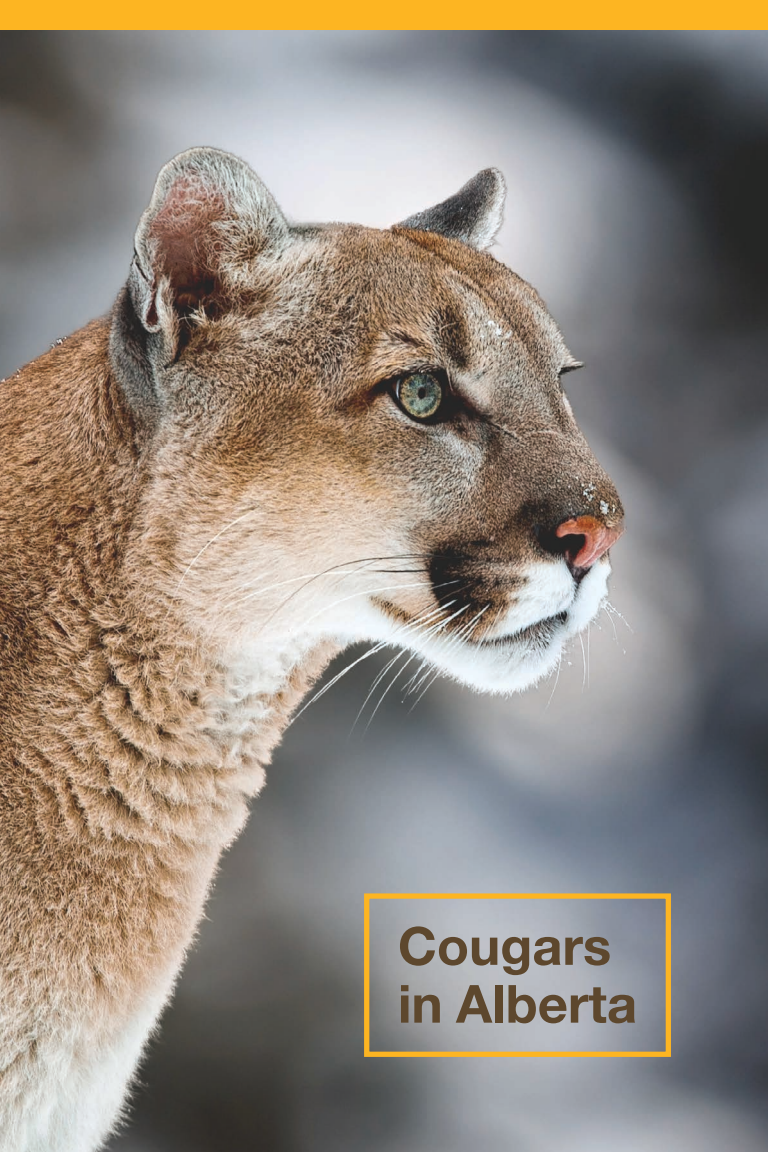
Portable electric fences have proven to be effective at barring bears from



camp sites. Modern fencing systems are light-weight, use AA or D batteries and often weigh less than four kilograms (10 pounds).

- The fence material should consist of metal wire or interwoven poly-metal wire.
- A variety of insulators and lightweight plastic or fiberglass stakes or posts are available. If insulators are temporarily attached to trees, care must be taken to not injure the tree, and all materials should be removed when leaving the site.

- The fence voltage should be tested regularly to ensure proper grounding. Water can be poured in the area of the ground rod if required.
- Electric fencing must be properly installed and regularly maintained in order to be effective. Any vegetation growth or other points of continuous contact will impact the electric flow.



**Cougars  
in Alberta**

## WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT COUGARS IN ALBERTA

Cougars are expanding their range in Alberta and can be encountered in many areas of the province.

- Cougars are extremely wary of humans and will not normally make their presence known to humans in the wild.
- Unlike bears, cougars will rarely attack humans to defend their young or a food source. Also unlike bears, cougars are rarely attracted to human food or garbage.
- Cougars are efficient hunters, preying primarily on deer, elk and moose. Cougars may also prey on pets or other domestic animals.
- Cougars do not normally leap down from trees to attack their prey. They stalk their prey from the ground, often from areas with heavy vegetation or other cover.



Cougar track, showing no claw imprints.

Cougar scat, with tracks and scrape marks around it.



A cougar's kill: a dead deer covered with leaves, grass and forest debris.



## How to prevent problems with cougars in the wild

- Practicing BearSmart habits will help you prevent unpleasant encounters with cougars as well.
- Cougars often see dogs as prey animals. If you are hiking, camping or fishing, consider leaving your dog at home. If you must bring your dog with you, for the dog's safety, keep it close and on a leash.
- Cougars are most active at dusk, night and dawn. Avoid hiking in cougar territory during these times.
- Cougars use vegetation as cover when they are stalking. Do not linger in areas with thick vegetation where a cougar can approach without being seen.
- The erratic movements, sounds and size of children can cause a cougar to see them as prey. Keep your children close and in sight when in cougar territory.



## **WHAT IS THE COUGAR DOING?**

The cougar is at a distance and not focused on you.

## **WHY IS THE COUGAR DOING THAT?**

The cougar may not know, or care, that you're there.

## **WHAT SHOULD YOU DO?**

- Do not provoke it.
- Gather everyone in close, especially children and dogs.
- Do not run, Continue facing the cougar. Back away slowly.



### **WHAT IS THE COUGAR DOING?**

The cougar is getting closer, staring intently, tracking your movements and may be in a crouched or stalking position.

### **WHY IS THE COUGAR DOING THAT?**

The cougar is focused on you, considering an attack.

### **WHAT SHOULD YOU DO?**

- Show the cougar you are not a prey animal and will fight back.
- Do not run. Continue facing the cougar and back away slowly.
- Shout at the cougar and make yourself look bigger by waving your arms and opening your jacket.
- Throw rocks or sticks. Stomp your feet.
- Use your noisemaker and bear spray.





## **WHAT IS THE COUGAR DOING?**

The cougar makes contact.

## **WHY IS THE COUGAR DOING THAT?**

The cougar thinks that it has found a source of food.

## **WHAT SHOULD YOU DO?**

- Do not play dead. Fight back, using anything you can find as a weapon. Use your bear spray. Aim at the cougar's face and eyes.
- Continue using your bear spray.
- If you're knocked down, get back up. Don't stop fighting.
- After the cougar has left, continue to watch for it until you reach a place of safety,

For more information, go to  
**[bearsmart.alberta.ca](http://bearsmart.alberta.ca)**

If the presence of a bear is a safety concern, contact  
your nearest Fish and Wildlife office at 310-0000,  
or, if after business hours, call 1-800-642-3800.



Alberta 