

# Bears in the Washington's North Cascades: What you should know if you spot one

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Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Meandering through the evergreens, spring's arrival was marked by unfurling fern and flowering berry plants.

My partner and I emerged from the forest trail and glimpsed the shimmering lake. But we weren't the only beings enjoying this spectacular Northwest scene. Some 100 yards away, a bear grazed on grasses below the snow-capped peaks.

Trying not to startle it before hiking any further, I called out, "Hey, bear"—announcing your presence is an important first step to avoid startling a bear in the Cascades.

Encounters like these are not rare in this stretch of mountains. But they are top of mind for many people exploring the backcountry, especially those who are contemplating mountains with more bears.

Experts say the federal government's plan to reintroduce [grizzlies](#) will change the outdoor recreation experience very little in the North Cascades. But some have responded to this plan with concerns about an increase in encounters with bears. As federal officials prepare to act on this plan, there's no timeline just yet, people will need to be more bear aware.

## **So how do you differentiate between bears, and how do you act in a way that keeps you, and the bear, safe?**

The one I spotted at Ross Lake looked up at us after I called out and stared inquisitively with its long nose and big ears before jogging back into the forest.

This bear, though almost strawberry-blonde in the sunlight, was not a wandering grizzly. There have been no verified sightings of grizzly bears in the U.S. portion of the North Cascades since 1996. It was just one of the ecosystem's many black bears.

The bear's appearance illustrates why it can often be difficult to decipher many possible grizzly bear sightings, said Jason Ransom, wildlife program supervisor for the North Cascades National Park Service Complex, in response to a photo shared by The Times.

The color of bears is usually what trips people up.

## **How can I tell if it is a black bear or a grizzly?**

A big differentiator is their claws—but if you can see them clearly, you're probably too close.

If you don't have a good pair of binoculars to check out the claws—shorter and more curved on a [black bear](#), and longer and often straighter on a grizzly—look at the bear's shoulders. Does it have a distinctive shoulder hump?

All bears might present a hump depending on their posture: foraging with their head down or standing on uneven ground, but grizzlies have a hump that doesn't go away with each step.

The hump is a muscle mass used for digging, not just a shoulder blade poking up, said Scott Fitkin, a district wildlife biologist for the state Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Next, take a look at the bear's face. A good rule of thumb is if it has a forehead or "dished face" it's likely a grizzly, but if it has a long "Roman nose" or straight face, it's probably a black bear.

Another way to describe it, a grizzly's face might resemble a big round pie dish with a nose stuck on it, Fitkin said.

In general, a grizzly bear's ears are smaller in relation to the size of its

head and more rounded. Whereas a black bear tends to have taller or larger ears in relation to the size of its head and they tend to be a little more pointed.

If you don't physically encounter a bear, but spot clear tracks in the mud, you might be able to spot some clear differences.

On a front grizzly track, any claw indentations typically extend two or more inches in front of the toe prints—this shows there were long front claws unique to grizzlies. The toes on the front track of a grizzly tend to be in a fairly straight alignment, versus the more arcing toe pad in a black bear print.

## **What should I do when visiting bear country?**

Fitkin, who started his career in 1989 on the North Cascades grizzly bear ecosystem evaluation project, has since spent about three decades serving as a wildlife biologist in the Methow Valley. He continues to work with bears and intentionally seeks them out in his personal time.

He said some people use bells to warn bears of their approach, but he finds they can be annoying and in some cases they might not be as effective as other strategies.

What's better is to just call out, let them hear a sound they can clearly associate with humans. Fitkin says if he's in an area with shorter sight distances or there's a lot of background noise, like a rushing stream, he'll just call out every so often to try to give an animal some advance warning that a human is approaching.

Anytime he's in the backcountry, "and even in the front country," he says, he carries bear spray.

If you're camping, you should be very conscious of how you store your food. When bears do steal human food, they start hanging around people intentionally often to look for another meal.

Store food properly in a bear-proof container. Hang it at least 10 feet high and at least 100 yards from your tent. Avoid spilling food near your campsite. And, Fitkin said, never ever put food in your tent or any other strong smelling thing like perfume or toothpaste that a bear might think is food.

If you smell the deep earthy stench of an animal carcass when you're hiking in the backcountry, steer clear; figure out where the wind is coming from and move away.

## **What to do if you see a bear?**

The scientific perspective is that grizzlies evolved in an open environment, where essentially, their only defense if they felt threatened was to stand their ground, whereas black bears evolved in more forested habitats. They tend to be more apt to move away or climb a tree if they spot you.

That said, most grizzly bears, even in an open environment, will move away from you.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recommends people stay at least 100 yards, or about the length of a football field, away from bears.

When Fitkin encounters a bear, usually he's looking at it, assessing its behavior and trying to slowly and quietly move away. If he thinks he's too close, or knows the bear already is aware of him, then he'll talk so the bear knows he's a human.

Do not stare directly at the bear because they can read it as confrontational or aggressive. Side eye the bear, keeping it in your field of view, don't turn your back and slowly move backward.

Fitkin said he also tries to move into a position where there might be something between him and the bear, like plants or a boulder or some other obstruction, to give the impression he's fading into the background and the bear no longer needs to be concerned.

In the majority of Fitkin's encounters, by the time he notices the bear, it's already noticed him and is moving away.

The closest he's come to being charged was in Katmai National Park in Alaska.

"I was not making as much noise as I should have been and we were each walking along a road," Fitkin said. "We both looked up and went, "Oh yeah, we're a little too close." I just backed away and talked, and the bear had his head low."

He and the grizzly both slowly moved away in opposite directions.

## **How common are bear attacks?**

Anytime you're dealing with a large carnivore, whether it's a bear, wolf, a cougar or anything else, there's always some risk.

"I never tell people there's no risk," Fitkin said. "But the risks are pretty minimal."

The National Park Service and Fish and Wildlife Service recently outlined a plan to capture three to seven grizzlies and release them in the North Cascades each summer for five to 10 years, establishing an initial

population of 25 bears in the North Cascades. They hope the grizzlies will rebuild a population of 200 bears in a century.

By comparison, over 1,000 grizzly bears are in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. Seven people have been killed by the bears in Yellowstone since the park was established in 1872.

In September, a grizzly bear killed two experienced backcountry campers in Banff National Park in Alberta. Another fatally mauled a woman near Yellowstone in July. Idaho hunters killed grizzly bears in self-defense in two separate September incidents.

Again, Fitkin said, if you follow some simple precautions, the risks are pretty minimal.

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