

Safety Hazards

Working With or Near Wildlife – Physical Aggression

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What are the hazards when working near wildlife?

Wildlife that may present a risk to workers may include bears (including grizzly and polar bears), cougars, moose, elk, deer, snakes, skunks, raccoons, porcupines, and many more.

While not every animal can cause harm to a worker, each should be treated with respect.

Animals can be more dangerous when they are defending food, defending their young, or when accustomed to human food.

This document covers working on land near live animals and ensuring the safety of humans from an aggressive animal. Please also see:

- [Stinging Insects - Working Safely](#)
- [Rabies](#)
- [Working With or Near Wildlife \(infectious diseases\)](#) which discusses zoonotic diseases (infectious diseases that can be transferred between animals and humans)

What occupations may be at risk?

Any worksite that operates in wilderness areas should include encounters with wildlife in their health and safety policies and procedures. These occupations may include miners (remote camps), prospectors, tree planters, surveyors, road construction, agricultural workers, or tree harvesters.

In urban settings, workers may encounter animals foraging for food or when the animal's nest has been disturbed.

What steps can a workplace take to work safely near wildlife?

Like any hazard that may affect a worker, the employer has a duty to take all reasonable precautions to provide a safe and healthy workplace or work environment. Employers should conduct a [hazard identification and risk assessment](#) to assess each situation when workers are working with or near wildlife.

For example, a food source is a common attractant. Risks include human food or garbage available or the wildlife's natural food available nearby, such as a berry patch or water (with fish).

The presence of other animals, such as dogs, may attract wildlife to the site. A dog may be seen as prey, or the animal may be attracted to the dog's food. On the other hand, a dog may be able to alert workers to the presence of wildlife. Many wildlife organizations do not recommend bringing pets into areas where wildlife such as bears and cougars have been reported.

Workplaces can:

- Conduct a hazard identification and risk assessment to determine what controls are required.
- Determine a safe location for the camp. Stay away from known food-rich areas (e.g., salmon-spawning areas or berry fields) or areas where there have been problems in the past).
- Be aware of any signs of wildlife in the area, such as scat (feces), or signs of feeding.
- Reduce the attraction of food sources by using safe food storage and disposal methods, such as sealed containers.
- Store food and garbage in an animal-resistant place such as a vehicle, hard-sided trailer, food locker, or in a closed container hung high in a tree away from the tent site.
- Keep kitchen and eating areas away from sleeping quarters.
- Wash all dishes and utensils immediately after use and store them in designated areas. Dishes, pots, pans, and containers may still be attractive even after washing.
- Know what other items attract the local wildlife, such as pets, pet food, barbeques, gasoline, toiletries (including toothpaste), and cosmetics.
- Bring or pack out all garbage. Do not burn or bury it. Store garbage the same way you store food.
- Train and educate workers and supervisors about working safely around wildlife.

- Do not allow workers to work alone, where possible. Use frequent check-in procedures if working alone.
- Have an effective two-way communication system (e.g., a two-way radio if cell phone reception is not consistently available).
- Use deterrents, such as whistles, horns, flashing lights, bear spray, or bear bangers.
- Have appropriate first aid, rescue and evacuation procedures in place.
- Plan the work activities to avoid times when animals are likely to be eating, such as early morning and evening.
- Report any wildlife issues with the local natural resources or wildlife control office.

If working in polar bear territory, consider installing heavy wire fences that are at least two metres (six feet) high. Always keep gates closed to prevent bears from entering. High metal platforms can be used to store food and equipment. Remove snow from the work and living areas to reduce hiding spots and increase visibility. Install good lighting.

What topics should wildlife education and training cover?

Education and training may include steps such as:

- Taking steps to not attract wildlife
- Identifying signs that animals are present in the area, such as tracks, scat, tree markings, food caches (such as a carcass covered with vegetation) or carcasses
- Leaving the area if there are fresh kills or tracks
- Responding if followed or attacked by an aggressive animal, such as a bear or cougar
- Using deterrents safely
- Keeping all sites such as camp areas clean
- Storing food and garbage appropriately
- Alerting others when wildlife has been sighted
- Responding if an animal shows signs of agitation or aggression

What should a worker do if an animal shows signs of aggression?

How to respond will depend on the animal present.

Bears

[Parks Canada](#) states that it is very difficult to predict the best strategy to use if a bear attacks. It is important to plan ahead and take steps to avoid an encounter in the first place.

Generally, all types of bears become aggressive if they:

- are surprised by you (or your pet),
- are protecting their young or a food source,
- have lost their fear of humans, or
- feel trapped.

It is important to make noise as you move to reduce the chance of a surprise encounter. Call out, clap hands, sing, or talk loudly, especially when near areas that bears frequent, such as rivers, dense vegetation, and berry patches.

Do not panic. Do not run. All bears can run quickly, some at speeds of 50 to 60 km/hr, and easily go uphill and downhill.

If you encounter a bear:

- Stay calm. Do not alarm the bear with loud noises or sudden movements. Stand still until you can assess the situation. Bears may show their stress by making a “woofing” sound, or by growling or snapping their jaws.
- Speak at a normal to low volume to the bear. Speaking lets the bear know you are human, not another animal. If the bear raises on their hind legs and waves its nose around, it is trying to identify you.
- Back away slowly, do not run. You cannot outrun a bear.
- Make yourself large. If with others, stay in a group.
- Do not drop your backpack. It can provide protection if the bear attacks.
- Leave the area or take a detour. You may need to wait until the bear decides to leave. Do not block the bear’s escape route.

The BC Forest Safety Council states that recommendations about what action to take when a bear attacks can vary. Generally speaking, if the bear strikes you, “play dead”. Lie on your stomach with your arms over the back of your neck. Spread your legs apart to make it difficult for the bear to flip you over. The goal is to protect your vital organs. Older information may say to roll in a ball to protect vital organs, but the prone position is now recommended. If the bear flips you over, roll back on your stomach. Do not struggle or fight back as this action will prolong the attack. Remain still until you are sure the bear has left.

If the bear does not leave, continues to stalk you, or continues attacking, change tactics. Do not play dead. Fight back. Try to reach a building or car. Use bear spray, shout, and fight back using a branch, rock, shovel, or other gear. Aim for the bear’s face.

Large cats, such as cougars

Make noise as you move to reduce the chance of a surprise encounter.

Stay calm. Excessive noise and movements can provoke an attack.

Leave space or a path for the animal to retreat.

Make yourself look as large as possible. If others, and especially children, are present, stand together to make yourself appear larger.

If the animal shows interest or follows you, respond aggressively. Maintain eye contact. Throw rocks and sticks as aggression may scare the cat away. Be a threat, not prey.

If attacked, fight back. Focus your attack on the animal's face and eyes.

Do not run. Do not turn your back on the animal.

Wolves or Coyotes

It is not common for wolves or coyotes to attack or pursue adult humans. Aggressive behaviour is often the result of the animal becoming conditioned to people due to direct or indirect feeding.

If the animal approaches:

- Make yourself look as large as possible.
- Wave your arms and throw objects at the animal
- Shout
- Do not turn your back or run away. Continue to be aggressive and slowly move to safety

Moose or Elk

While moose and elk are generally passive, they may charge if they feel threatened, especially if calves are close by.

Watch for signs of agitation, such as its ears being pinned back, the hair on its neck and shoulders being raised, and its eyes bulging. It may also smack its lips or click its teeth.

If charged by a moose, take cover behind a larger tree or rock. If charged by an elk, stand still and make yourself look large.

If you fall, curl into a ball, protect your head with your hands, and stay still. Their legs are very powerful, and they may slam or kick.

Do not make loud noises, sudden movements, chase, or harass the animal.

Do not assume that a calf that is by itself has been abandoned. The mother will often move around to eat. If you feel a calf is abandoned, call your local wildlife service.

Note: More people die from being in a vehicle collision with a large animal, such as a moose. Drive slowly and watch the sides of the road for animals.

Skunks, Porcupines, or Raccoons

While usually considered a nuisance, skunks, porcupines, raccoons, and other normally passive animals can become defensive if they feel threatened. Remove food sources and other items that these animals may find attractive.

When feeling threatened, these animals may grunt, growl, or hiss. They may also stomp their feet, arch their backs, raise their fur, or take other steps to make themselves look larger.

Skunks can spray an oily musk in a wide arc up to three metres away. The spray can cause nausea and temporary blindness. The smell is very unpleasant. Note: Washing with water may make the musk more potent. Try a solution with baking soda or hydrogen peroxide along with a grease-cutting dish detergent. Do not get these products in your or your pet's eyes. Always know how to work safely with chemicals and other products.

Porcupines, contrary to popular thinking, do not shoot or throw their quills. However, the quills will become easily embedded in the skin if contact is made. Porcupines can also emit a very musky scent.

Raccoons may bite or scratch.

Snakes

Be familiar with snake habitats and behaviour.

Wear long pants and high boots (rubber or leather) when working in tall grass or shrubs.

Use a stick to move objects or investigate spaces that you cannot see into. Do not put your hands or feet in unseen spaces.

Walk around rocks and logs. Check the area on the other side of a rock or log if you must step over.

If you are in a rattlesnake area, and if you hear a rattle. Stop immediately. Look for the snake before proceeding. If you are close to the snake, stay still and let the snake calm down and leave. If you are more than the snake's body length away, step back and walk around it.

While rattlesnake bites are rare, if bitten:

- Stay calm.
- Leave the area. Move slowly or be carried.
- Remove or loosen any tight clothing or jewellery.
- Go to the nearest hospital. Call 911 to alert them when possible.
- Mark the swelling with lines and times about every 10 minutes. These markings will help the doctors assess the severity of the bite.

- Do not apply a tourniquet, try to suck the venom out of the wound, or apply ice.
 - Do not kill the snake or try to capture it.
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Fact sheet first published: 2024-10-30

Fact sheet last revised: 2024-10-30

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