



Polar bears are predators, primarily hunting seals, while grizzlies and black bears mostly eat plants. As predators, polar bears will investigate humans, their camps and may even consider humans as a food source.

Polar bear behaviour is very different from that of grizzly and black bears.

- After a polar bear attack or encounter** follow this emergency check list:
1. **STAY CALM** and ensure you are safe.
  2. Check that all people in your group are accounted for.
  3. Call for help by radio or satellite phone. (Get contact numbers at your orientation to the park.)
  4. Report location and time of incident.
  5. Report number of people involved.
  6. Report extent of injuries and property damage.
  7. Report numbers and last locations of all polar bears involved in the incident.
  8. Report reason for the attack if known (female protecting cubs, surprise, defending food source, etc.)
  9. Report description of bears (male or female, size, markings, etc.)
  10. Stand by to provide additional information to rescuers.
- Each encounter with a polar bear is unique.** Good judgement, common sense and familiarity with polar bear behaviour are required in all situations. This pamphlet provides guidelines for avoiding and dealing with polar bear encounters. For your safety and the safety of the bears, please read this pamphlet carefully and seriously consider the risks involved with travel in polar bear country. Further information is available in the DVD "Polar Bears: A Guide to Safety" developed by Parks Canada and the Safety in Bear Country Society.

## SAFETY in Polar Bear Country



[parksCanada.gc.ca](http://parksCanada.gc.ca)

# Safety in Polar Bear Country

Bringing you Canada's natural and historic treasures



WAVE LYNCH



Parks Canada Parcs Canada

Canada

## AVOIDING an ENCOUNTER

- Ask Parks Canada staff about current bear activity.** Some areas may be closed due to bear activity; obey written and oral warnings.
- Be alert and aware of your surroundings.** Scan all around with binoculars at regular intervals. Be vigilant! Watch for signs such as tracks, droppings, diggings, wildlife carcasses and polar bear dens.
- Travel in daylight and avoid areas of restricted visibility.** Be especially careful in areas along the coast, where a polar bear may be hidden behind boulders, pressure ridges (pushed up sea ice), driftwood or vegetation.
- Travel in groups and stay together to increase your safety.** The larger the group the greater the chances of deterring a bear.

- Never feed bears.** A bear that finds food from a human source begins to associate humans with food. This can result in the bear losing its natural tendency to avoid people and becoming persistent in its search for human food. The consequences for you and the bear can be serious. A bear that associates food with humans is more likely to injure people and these bears may have to be relocated or killed. It is also illegal to feed any wildlife in a national park.
- Use sealed bags and containers or bear-proof canisters to store food and garbage. Pack out all garbage.**
- Eliminate or reduce odours from yourself and your camp.** Avoid using scented soaps and cosmetics and avoid bringing strong smelling foods.

- Never approach a bear for any reason.** Every bear defends a "critical space", which varies with each bear and each situation; it may be a few metres or a hundred metres. Intrusion within this space is considered a threat and may provoke an attack. Approaching a bear could be considered disturbing wildlife which is an offence under the National Parks Wildlife Regulations.
- Never approach a fresh kill or carcass as polar bears will defend their food.** Adult polar bears will often only eat the fat of beached whales, seals and other kills, but other bears may scavenge from these carcasses.

## MORE about Polar Bears

Polar bears are the largest land carnivore in North America. An adult male typically weighs 300-450 kg, stretching 3 metres from nose to tail. They are strong, fast, agile on land or ice, and are expert swimmers and divers. Their sense of smell is exceptional, their eyesight comparable to a human's. Polar bears are naturally curious, not fearless as they have been labelled. They are shy and prefer to avoid confrontations with humans and other polar bears. Their primary prey is the ringed seal but they will also prey on birds, eggs, small mammals, and even humans. They also scavenge anything from beached whales to human garbage. In the heat of summer, polar bears may appear slow and docile, but they are capable of moving swiftly and with purpose.

This pamphlet was developed for national parks in the Arctic. Polar bears and bear encounters are more numerous in Ukkusiksalik and Wapusk National Parks than other Arctic national parks. Independent travelling in these parks is not recommended, but guided trips are available. Contact Ukkusiksalik or Wapusk National Parks for further information.

**CREDIT:** Bromley, Marianne. 1996. *Safety in Polar Bear Country*. Northwest Territories Renewable Resources, Yellowknife, NWT. 24 pp.

Bromley, Marianne. 1996. *Safety in Polar Bear Country*. Northwest Territories Renewable Resources, Yellowknife. 24 pp.

Canadian Wildlife Service. *Hinterland Who's Who*. <http://www.hww.ca/hww2.asp?id=99>

Stirling, I. 1988. *Polar Bears*. University of Michigan Press. Available in soft cover from Fitzhenry and Whiteside, Markam, ON. 220 pp.

Safety in Bear Country Society. 2006. *Polar Bears: A Guide To Safety*. Available from Distribution Access, 1-866-999-5292. DVD.

## Polar Bear CONSERVATION

Nanuq, the great white bear, is found in many of Canada's northern national parks and in some national historic sites. Whenever bears and people occupy the same area, conflict can arise. Polar bears and people have coexisted for thousands of years but contact between the two must be minimised to continue this legacy. Successful polar bear conservation requires your co-operation.

**For your safety, and the safety of the bears, learn about safe travel in polar bear country and take precautions.**

By choosing to travel in polar bear country you not only accept the associated risks, but also the responsibility to alter your plans, actions and attitudes to accommodate these magnificent animals.

**Report all polar bear sightings and signs to park staff, as soon as possible.**

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

**Auyuittuq National Park and Quttinirpaaq National Park**  
Box 353  
Pangnirtung, NU X0A 0R0  
PHONE: **867-473-2500**  
E-MAIL: [nunavut.info@pc.gc.ca](mailto:nunavut.info@pc.gc.ca)

**Sirmilik National Park**  
Box 300  
Pond Inlet, NU X0A 0S0  
PHONE: **867-899-8092**  
E-MAIL: [sirmilik.info@pc.gc.ca](mailto:sirmilik.info@pc.gc.ca)

**Ukkusiksalik National Park**  
Box 220  
Repulse Bay, NU X0C 0H0  
PHONE: **867-462-4500**  
E-MAIL: [ukkusiksalik.info@pc.gc.ca](mailto:ukkusiksalik.info@pc.gc.ca)

**Torngat Mountains National Park**  
Box 471  
Nain, NL A0P 1L0  
PHONE: **1-800-922-1290** or **709-458-2417**  
E-MAIL: [torngats.info@pc.gc.ca](mailto:torngats.info@pc.gc.ca)

**Wapusk National Park**  
Box 127  
Churchill, MB R0B 0E0  
PHONE: **204-675-8863**  
E-MAIL: [wapusk.np@pc.gc.ca](mailto:wapusk.np@pc.gc.ca)

**Western Arctic**  
Ivvavik National Park  
Aulavik National Park  
Tuktut Nogait National Park  
Pingo Canadian Landmark  
Box 1840, Inuvik, NT X0E 0T0  
PHONE: **867-777-8800**  
E-MAIL: [inuvik.info@pc.gc.ca](mailto:inuvik.info@pc.gc.ca)

**Margo Supplies**

A supplier of bear deterrents and warning devices.

[www.margosupplies.com](http://www.margosupplies.com)

ISBN: 978-1-100-16418-2 R62-342/2010E



## Avoid bear feeding areas.

A polar bear's primary food source is seal so these species are often found in the same places.

- **In fall, winter and early spring** most polar bears are on the sea ice hunting seals by the floe edge, open water leads and along pressure ridges. Bears and seals can also be found in places where the ice is thin or cracked, such as tide cracks in land-fast ice or at toes of glaciers. Seals can more easily maintain breathing holes in these areas.
- **In early spring**, females with cubs tend to hunt along pressure ridges and cracks in land-fast ice (particularly in bays) where seal birthing dens are found.
- **During the ice-free summer season**, when polar bears are forced ashore, they can be found anywhere but they generally hunt and scavenge along coastlines, beaches and rocky islands. Keep an eye on the ocean, polar bears are often well hidden when swimming.

## Stay away from polar bear den sites.

Unlike other bears, there is no time when all polar bears are inactive in dens.

- **Maternity dens** are excavated by pregnant females in snow drifts on leeward (wind protected) slopes of coastal hills and valleys. In the Baffin Region, dens can be found at high elevations on snowfields and glaciers. Maternity dens are occupied from fall to early spring. The dens are inconspicuous, however, bear tracks leading to and from the site in early autumn or late spring or ventilation holes can indicate their presence.
- **Temporary dens** are excavated in snow drifts or pressure ridges by polar bears (males, females and females with cubs) that are active over the winter. The dens can be used as resting places or as temporary shelter from bad weather. They can be used from a few days to several months.
- **Summer retreat dens** are excavated during the open water season in the remaining snow banks or into the permafrost. These can also be at higher elevations on snowfields and glaciers or the valleys leading up to them. Male and female bears of all age groups use them to keep cool and avoid insect harassment.

## Avoid camping on beaches, islands, along coastlines and on obvious movement corridors.

- Before making camp, look around for tracks or other signs of bear activity.
- Polar bears often travel along coastlines using points of land and rocky islets near the coast to navigate.
- In the summer, blowing sea ice may transport polar bears into coastal areas. Avoid areas where the pack ice is blowing in to shore.
- Valleys and passes are often used to cross peninsulas or islands and to move from one area to another.
- Polar bears travel and hunt along the edges of ice floes.

**Camp inland on a butte or bluff with a good view of surrounding terrain.** Avoid areas where bears might hide, such as blind corners, snow banks, pressure ridges and other places with visual impediments.

**Set up tents in a line rather than a circle and maintain at least 5 metres between them.** If a bear comes into camp, it will not feel surrounded and will have an avenue of escape without feeling threatened. Keep watch 24 hours per day. Take turns keeping watch during sleeping periods.

**Do not sleep in the open without a tent.** You may look like a seal and polar bears are very curious. People sleeping in the open have been attacked.

**Cook at least 50 metres from your sleeping area in a place visible from your tent.** Strain food particles from dishwater and store with garbage. Dump dishwater at least 50 metres from your sleeping area, rivers, streams and lakes.

**Store food and garbage in bear-proof containers or sealed bags and containers secured under rocks within view of your tent. A permit is required to set up a food cache.**

Placing pots on top may serve as an alarm. If you have a warning system, store your food within its perimeter. DO NOT store food inside your tent.

## HANDLING an ENCOUNTER

**Before your trip, discuss possible plans of action for dealing with bears in a variety of circumstances and be sure everyone understands.** The actions of each individual either contribute to or detract from the safety of everyone else.

**Every attack or encounter is different. To find out more about bear behaviour, hire a guide or talk to knowledgeable people in the community.**

**Stay calm, notify everyone in the group, be aware of your surroundings and assess the situation.** What is the bear doing? What is the bear's behaviour?

### If a bear does not know you are there:

- **quietly back away and leave the area** either in the direction you came or make a wide detour around the bear. Do not run, move quickly or make motions that might attract the bear's attention.
- **stay downwind**, so the bear cannot smell you and detect your presence.
- **keep an eye on the bear.**

### If a bear knows you are there and shows signs of being curious, such as:

- moving slowly with frequent stops,
- standing on hind legs and sniffing the air,
- holding its head high with ears forward or to the side,
- moving its head from side to side, or
- trying to catch your scent by circling downwind and approaching from behind.

#### THEN:

- **help it to identify you as a human,**
- **wave your arms over your head and talk in low tones,**
- **move slowly upwind** of the bear so it can get your scent.

### If the bear has been surprised at close range or shows signs of being agitated or threatened, such as:

- huffing, panting, hissing, growling or jaw-snapping,
- stamping its feet,
- staring directly at a person, or
- lowering its head with ears laid back.

#### THEN:

- **act non-threatening.** Do not shout or make sudden movements, which might provoke the bear. Never huff or hiss as this can cause a polar bear to charge.
- **avoid direct eye contact.**
- **back away slowly.** DO NOT RUN.
- **be prepared to use deterrents.**

### If the bear shows signs of stalking or hunting you, such as:

- following you or circling you,
- approaching directly, intently and unafraid,
- returning after being scared away, or
- appears wounded, old or thin.

#### THEN:

- **fight back!** Use any potential weapon, group together and make loud noises.
- **DO NOT RUN.**
- **be prepared to use deterrents.**

### If a bear charges:

- **stand your ground and be prepared to fight!** Focus on hitting the bear in sensitive areas, especially the face and nose if possible. Bluff charges are rare.

## Never get between a bear and her cubs.

If a female with cubs is surprised at close range or separated from her cubs she will likely attack to defend her cubs.

- **leave the area immediately.**
- **stay in a group.**
- **fight back if she attacks.**



WAYNE LYNCH

**Always leave an escape route for the bear.**

**Carry deterrents and know how to use them.**

Report all bear sightings and signs to park staff.

CONTACT PARKS CANADA FOR MORE INFORMATION.

## DETERRENTS

Reducing the threat posed by a polar bear during an interaction may be difficult. Non-lethal deterrents cannot be depended on to ensure safety. The best way to live safely with bears is to avoid contact with them.

Any potential weapon must be considered, such as skis, poles, rocks, blocks of ice or even knives.

Stay together as a group. This can be a deterrent and actions, such as making noise, jumping, waving arms, throwing things, may help to drive a polar bear away.

## COMMERCIAL deterrents

- **Noisemakers** including air horns, pistol and pen launched bear bangers may scare a bear away.
- **Pepper spray** is effective against polar bears, but has some limitations. It must be warm enough to atomize and it must be used at close range. Also be aware of wind direction to avoid having the spray blow into your face.
- **Know how and when to use these deterrents and practice beforehand.**
- **Availability of commercial deterrents is limited in the north**, most will have to be purchased elsewhere and transported as dangerous goods.
- **Portable solar electric fences** may deter a bear at your campsite if properly installed and maintained.
- Contact Parks Canada for more information.

**In Canada's national parks it is unlawful to possess a firearm unless you are a licensed guide or bear monitor with a permit.** Consider hiring a guide or a bear monitor for increased safety. If you operate a guiding or outfitting business and wish your guides to be considered for a firearms permit, please contact the National Park or Site or Field Unit Office.

The exception to this regulation is for beneficiaries of the Inuvialuit Final Agreement, the Nunavut Land Claim Agreement, the Labrador Inuit Land Claims Agreement, the Nunavik Inuit Land Claim Agreement and any future land claim agreements, who can carry firearms when engaged in traditional activities within national parks within their land claim area.

you for protection and stake them downwind from your sleeping area. Be sure to clean up any dog food leftovers. Dogs must be under control at all times within national parks to avoid wildlife harassment.

**Designate a bear monitor** to keep watch if a polar bear might be nearby. Consider moving your camp if there is a bear in the area.

## WARNING systems

**Set up a portable trip-wire or motion detector alarm system around your tent** to alert you if a polar bear approaches your camp. Before leaving home, contact Parks Canada for more information.

**You may wish to take a dog, but only one that has proven experience with polar bears.** Several dogs are better than one. Know how to handle them. Keep them staked so they cannot run to