



## BLACK BEAR NEWS - READ AND HEED (PLEASE !)

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In the late 1980's I worked by myself building a rock waterbar on the long slope between Hanging Rock and the peak of Three Ridges. For lunch I went uphill a hundred yards or so to a pleasant sitting rock. When I came back to the work site I found a large rock near the end of the partially finished waterbar overturned, and a ground bee nest dug into by Mr. Bear.

In June 1998, a fellow Konnarock worker left a nice, full, Nalgene™ water bottle (to use the next day) along the trail we had built that day. In the morning it was empty, quite professionally punctured by a goodly number of bear teeth. Bear and deer use our trails as much as we do. Almost every section of trail we built that year had foot prints the next day.

On 7 September 1998 a bear ran along the A.T., 15-feet from where a camper had his tent pitched at Hanging Rock. On the 8th, Bea saw one along the Blue Ridge Parkway just north of the Humpback Rocks Visitor Center.

On 20 September 1998 we found a very evident bear trail close to Gid Spring. Next morning fresh (!) bear scat was found just 100-yards south of Maupin Field on the A.T. Nighttime sounds we heard Friday and Saturday nights from our sleeping bags, the branch breaking and etc., may have been the big fellow, not deer. It did not go step, step, step, like a deer. A known bear had a regular route across 664 just below Reeds Gap during the summer of 1998.

In mid-2008 a black bear regularly visited Maupin Field, Pine Mountain on the Fire Road, Reeds Gap, and all points in between. Perhaps out of curiosity, it took a swipe at a tent and badly damaged it. No one was inside.

In the fall of 2008 I stood on a very evident bear trail cutting a blowdown from the fire road.

You may not see them but they are there. As more people homes are built in the mountains, bears loose some of their innate fear of man. I have first-hand reports of folks at Wintergreen feeding bears.

The following is a **very brief** summary of a **few** things you might want to know and practice:

This short article covers only a high point or two. It is not a complete how-to manual ! Bear habits and bear habitats vary in different parts of the country. What works in one area, may not work in another. You are the visitor in the bear's territory.

**Some of this information was gleaned in 1998. Some may have changed since then.** Do some work and find up-to-date information from a number of different sources, including the land manager where you will be hiking.

Get a good book such as:

(1) *The Backpacker's Field Manual* by Rick Curtis, Princeton University Outdoor Action, Three Rivers Press, available from [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com), or

(2) *Bear Attacks: Their Cause and Avoidance*, by Stephen Herrero, Lyons and Burford, 31 W. 21st St., NY, NY 10010 (212) 620-9580.

Better yet, read several books. That way you get differing views and more information. Go on the Internet, do some searching. One good web site is: [www.BeBearAware.org](http://www.BeBearAware.org), another is <http://www.dgif.virginia.gov/wildlife/bear/> A lot of information is available. Learn what to do, and not do, during a bear encounter in camp or the woods. **Be prepared.**

Stay away from animal carcasses. Black bears are primarily vegetarian, but eat anything ! They may guard their food caches with vigor. Don't surprise a bear, and don't try to get closer for a better photograph - use that telephoto and the binoculars. Make sure the bear sees you, but do so **gently**. Don't bounce around waving arms and yelling to get its attention. Never stare at a bear or make eye contact. Back away slowly, talking softly.

Do not turn your back to a bear. Never run from a bear. A bear can run 35 mph - can you ? Besides, when you run, you very quickly trigger the bear's hunter/killer/chase instincts. Don't climb a tree; they can do it better and quicker than you. And don't put yourself between a sow and her cubs.

Sleep in a tent, not on the bare ground. Don't hike at night. Keep that food out of your tent, and out of the shelter. Never put any food in your pockets, not even temporarily - the smell will stay long after the candy bar or apple is gone.

Keeping smells sealed can help keep food safe. Pack all your food in tightly sealed zipper-type plastic bags. Maybe we who take gourmet goodies should resort to more conventional, and less tempting, backpacking food, properly suspended.

Hang your bear bag 15-feet or higher off the ground, and 8-feet from the nearest tree trunk. To do this: counterbalance the food bag; hang it over a strong, live branch that won't break in the wind or as your bag gets heavier in the rain; hang it between two trees with the 'M' hang; or use the Morrison Haul System. See the TATC Education Handout titled: "BEAR BAGGING," and the figures therein incorporated. Don't suspend it next to your tent, go 200-feet or more away. Bears can learn to break those diagonal ropes to get at your food bag.

When you bag your food, also bag your toothpaste/toothbrush and any other toiletries. Bag anything with an odor (soap, shampoo, even your lip balm). Bag used tampons and the like. If you cook a really aromatic meal or spill food on your clothes, hang them with the food - don't take them into the tent. After cooking, don't wipe your hands on your trousers.

Try to pack food **and** toiletries in your pack so that smells are not transferred to the pack. Use those zipper-type bags or canoe-type dry bags. It could ruin the trip to find your pack shredded just because you carried an unprotected apple or leaky toothpaste in an outer pocket yesterday.

Remember that what is clean to you is delectable to a bear. A nice, clean cooking pot (to you) can still smell good to our dark, furry friends.

Cook food and wash dishes 200-feet from your camp, the water source, and the trail. Cooking away from your tent gets more important as bear sign increases. Keep those food smells and scraps a long, long way away from where you sleep. In a dry periods natural food, such as berries and fruit, may be in short supply.

Remember all the tricks you've seen bears do in circuses and on the telly ? They are very smart animals and learn quickly. Also, they are very, very adaptive ! Once a bear learns to associate the human smell and the food smell, it will return again, and again, and again to the campground, to the garbage dump, to the tent site, to the lunch-time overlook. Don't habituate the wild ones to the smell of our garbage and ourselves. Don't help them learn !!! Don't give them an invitation.

Bears hibernate, don't they ? Well... sometimes they do. But they can be found active almost all year here in Virginia. Don't bet on not having them in the area in the winter.

Do grizzlies or black bears hurt more people ? "Largely because there are more of them, and they adapt better to human presence,

black bears injure more people than grizzlies (Bear Manners: Getting Along in the Backcountry, by Dean Ahearn)."

Bury **NO** (!) garbage, and throw **NO** garbage in the woods. Keep garbage in a separate zipper-type bag, in your food bag, up in that tree. **PACK IT IN - PACK IT OUT.**

Watch where you camp. Not all backpackers are as careful as you **must** learn to be. Just imagine what a popular overlook, trailside shelter, or Maupin Field would smell like to a bear, if just one person a day over a holiday weekend dumped sardine oil only 10-feet from the shelter or the tent site where you erected your tent. Please **drain** those sardines or canned chicken 500-ft from tent sites, shelters, and gathering places like overlooks and streamside sitting spots. Better yet, be safe - leave those smelly things home !! Draining fluids from cans does not comply with Leave No Trace. Please, always, **always**, abide by those valuable **Leave No Trace** principles !! Why tempt Mr. Bruin ?

In areas of high black or brown bear populations, such as Mount Whitney and Great Smokey Mountains National Park, and in grizzly bear country, consult with the local land management agency for proper hiking, camping, food preparation, and bear confrontation guidelines in **THAT** area. Recommendations vary from area to area and from bear species to bear species. You need to know what to do, and what not to do, under varying conditions. This could save your food, or your **LIFE**.

Also refer to the TATC Education Handout titled: "BEAR BAGGING."

| A Pine Needle Fell in the Forest |                     |                        |
|----------------------------------|---------------------|------------------------|
| Deer Saw It.                     | Fox Heard It.       | Bear Smelled It.       |
| Hang That Food.                  | Watch Those Smells. | Hang Those Toiletries. |

***Be sensible, be prudent.***

***The forest is their home - we humans are the visitors.***

***Even black bears do sometimes stalk and kill humans.***