

Wilderness Way Tips
by Tamarack Song

Growling Down the Bear

Black Bears, who range over 50% of our continent, are very active at this time of year. They are packing in all the food they can to put on winter fat. It is also Bear hunting season in many areas, which keeps them moving, so the chance of Bear encounters for us woods wanderers is high. I'd like to share a bit of what Bears have taught me about how to peacefully co-exist with them. I've found out that much of what is popularly believed about Bears is myth, and that knowing them for who they actually are is the best thing we can do to act wisely and travel safely in their domain.

A lean Bear can run 30 miles an hour and climb a tree as fast as a Squirrel. Her broad padded feet allow her to move very quietly when she wants to, and her hearing (although I found it to be not as sharp as wolf's or deer's) is better than mine. She is not as near-sighted as many think – she can usually see me at one hundred yards. At close range she relies equally on sight and smell. However it is her sense of smell that excels (As a rule of thumb, the longer an animal's muzzle, the better his sense of smell).

Perhaps the most important thing to know about the black Bear is that, unlike her cousin the Grizzly, she is all bluff. When a Bear resorts to loud whoofs and teeth clacking, it is out of nervousness and fear rather than aggression. Even when she slaps the ground and lunges she is just bluff-charging, telling you to “back off” because she feels crowded.

And then there is the most popular myth – don't get between a mother and her cubs. No matter how big an upset display she puts on, it is highly unlikely that she will attack. Although I in no way recommend this, I know of people who have picked up bawling cubs without being harmed.

So is there anything to fear about the black Bear? Oh yes – silence! Almost all killings of Humans have been done not by campground beggars, but by true hunters who have silently stalked and pounced upon their prey. Bears *are* predators. **Remember: the more visible and ornery the Bear, the safer she is to be around; the more quiet and stealthy the Bear, the more dangerous she is.** I know this directly contradicts common knowledge, but if we are going to be safe in Bear country, we have to let go of our misconceptions.

The last myth is “playing dead” – what most people I have talked with, believed to be the best thing to do if attacked. Dead prey is exactly what a predator wants, so why look like a ready-to-eat meal? If you want to live, you need to out-bear the Bear. Get up and puff up – growl, kick, punch, club, bash with a rock. Above all, **DO NOT RUN.** You'll only show your weakness, and there is nothing a predator likes more than the chase.

Also, unless you are faster than a Squirrel, don't even think about climbing a tree.

Even though she is the most intelligent four-legged predator, most Humans are smarter, and thus capable of out-acting even this master bluffer.

In Bear country consult the local Park or Forest Ranger for safe camping guidelines.
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