

# Aggressive Wildlife Encounters While Working in Field

## Safety Session 1/2009

With many DNR employees working in the field, often alone, it is not uncommon to come across large wild animals. These encounters are likely to be quick, with animals more afraid of you, than you are of them. Below is a brief guide on what to do if you do come across some of the more intimidating animals that do not seem to be scared off quickly. It is not intended to be exhaustive, but to give some helpful guidance.

### Black Bear



Photo credit to MN DNR

If you encounter a Black Bear:

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- Remain calm and avoid sudden movements.
  - Give the bear plenty of room, allowing it to continue its activities undisturbed. Every bear has a zone of danger or personal space -- that is, the distance within which a bear feels threatened. If it changes its natural behavior (feeding, foraging or movement) because of your presence, you are too close. If you stray within that comfort zone, a bear may react aggressively in the form of a bluff charge, bodily contact, or even an outright attack.
  - If you spot a bear and the bear is unaware of you, detour quickly and quietly away.
  - If spotted by a bear, try to get its attention while it is a good distance away. Help the bear to recognize that you are human, by talking to it in a normal voice or waving your arms. If a bear cannot tell what you are, it may come closer or stand on its hind legs to get a better look or smell. A standing bear is usually curious, not threatening.
  - Some bears will bluff their way out of a threatening situation by charging, then veering off or stopping abruptly at the last second. Bear experts generally recommend standing still until the bear stops and then slowly backing away.
  - Never run from a bear. Running may elicit a chase from an otherwise non-aggressive bear, and since they can run faster than 30 mph, you have no chance of outrunning them.
  - Never feed or toss food to a bear.
  - Climbing a tree to avoid bears is popular advice but not very practical in many circumstances. All black bears can climb trees. Running to a tree may provoke an otherwise uncertain bear to chase you.
  - Throw something onto the ground if the bear pursues you, as it may be distracted by this and allow you to escape.
  - If you carry pepper spray, be sure that you have trained with it before trusting it during an attack.

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Black bears attack very rarely, but when they do it is most likely a predatory attack (i.e. looking for a meal). Even though a normal black bear does not view people as food, a starving or injured bear might. Playing dead or climbing a tree will not stop these kind of attacks, so your best recourse is to act aggressively and try to intimidate the bear by yelling and waving your arms and if necessary, fight back using any object available.

When the bear no longer feels threatened, it will usually leave the area. Do not move or make noise until you are sure the bear is gone.

Bear Safety Tips, from Darren Smith, for bout.com

Warnings against women camping during menstrual periods, are completely unfounded. Black bears have not been known to kill anyone in defense of their cubs.

North American Bear Center, Ely, MN web site retrieved 12/1/08

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There is no published record regarding black bear responses to menstrual blood, according to a study done by Lynn Rogers, USFS, North Central Forest Experiment Station, Ely MN. J. Wildl. Manage 55.(4):632-634

General information on “Learning to Live With Bears”, see website link from MN DNR: [http://files.dnr.state.mn.us/assistance/backyard/privatelandsprogram/bear\\_country.pdf](http://files.dnr.state.mn.us/assistance/backyard/privatelandsprogram/bear_country.pdf)

### **Large Cats - Cougars & Bobcats**

If you encounter a bobcat in the wild, it will be more interested in finding food than attacking you. If bobcat is aggressive and approaching you, it likely to have rabies. Attempts should be made to kill the animal.  
Photo credit Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife



Following was provided by Oregon Division of Wildlife:

#### **If you live in Cougar country**

- Learn your neighborhood. Be aware of any wildlife corridors or places where deer concentrate.
- Walk pets during the day and keep them on a leash.
- Keep pets indoors at dawn and dusk. Shelter them for the night.
- Feed pets indoors.
- Don't leave food and garbage outside.
- Use animal-proof garbage cans if necessary.
- Remove heavy brush from near the house and play areas.
- Install motion-activated light outdoors along walkways and driveways.
- Be more cautious at dawn and dusk when cougars are most active.
- Do not feed any wildlife. By attracting other wildlife, you may attract a cougar.

- Keep areas around bird feeders clean.
- Deer-proof your garden and yard with nets, lights, fencing.
- Fence and shelter livestock. Move them to sheds or barns at night.

### **If You Recreate in Cougar Country**

- Be aware of your surroundings at all times.
- Leave your dog at home or keep it on a leash. Pets running free may lead a cougar back to you.
- Hike in groups. Make noise to alert wildlife of your presence.
- Keep campsites clean. Sleep 100 yards from cooking areas.
- Store food in animal-proof containers.
- Carry deterrent spray.
- Be cautious at dusk and dawn.
- Never feed any wildlife. Prey attracts predators.
- Do not approach any wildlife; stay at least 100 yards away.
- Steer clear of baby wildlife. Mother is likely nearby.
- Be alert when sitting quietly or stopping to rest.
- Be especially alert at dawn and dusk when cougars are most active.
- Be aware that animal calls and animal kills can attract a cougar.

### **If You Encounter a Cougar**

- Cougars often will retreat if given the opportunity. Leave the animal a way to escape.
- Stay calm and stand your ground.
- Maintain direct eye contact.
- Back away slowly.
- Do not run. Running triggers a chase response in cougars, which could lead to an attack.
- Raise your voice and speak firmly.
- If the cougar seems aggressive, raise your arms to make yourself look larger and clap your hands.
- If in the very unusual event that a cougar attacks you, fight back with rocks, sticks, tools or any items available.



### **Wolves**

Photo from International Wolf Center

Wolves nearly always blink first, experts say, but yelling will drive off a wolf, as will pepper spray. "If you're walking on a dark trail at midnight and you turn a corner and

come across a pack of 20 wolves, enjoy them," said Ed Bangs. "Because they'll be gone in a few seconds."

But wolves might not vanish so quickly if a hiker has a dog along. Northern Rockies gray wolves have killed at least 83 dogs since 1987, and last year killed 30 of their own number in territorial disputes.

"Wolves consider dogs as strange wolves," said Bangs. "A dog may think that a wolf barking or howling is a dog that wants to play. Trust me, that is not the case."

Other instances where wolves might act aggressively is near a den or a kill site.

"If you come into an area where you see a kill, particularly if it's kind of fresh, back out of there and go someplace else," said Carol Sime.

[Deseret News \(Salt Lake City\), Jun 1, 2006](#) by [Keith Ridler Associated Press](#)

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But overall, wolf attacks on people are and always have been rare compared to other wildlife species, both large and small. Most are preventable.

#### What should I do if I have a wolf encounter?

As for all wildlife, do not provide artificial food sources.

Wolves can be aggressive toward domestic dogs because the wolf views the dog as a "trespassing wolf" that should be driven away or killed. Wolves could be aggressive towards dogs any time, but especially leading up to and during the breeding season (December – February) and the denning period (April - May), or if wolf pups are near by.

If you encounter a wolf and your dog is present, bring your dog to heel at your side as soon as possible. Standing between your dog and the wolf usually ends an encounter. Do not try and break up a physical fight between the wolf and your dog, to avoid any risk of injury to yourself.

If a wolf approaches you or you surprise a wolf:

- stand tall and make yourself look larger
- act aggressively towards it -- make noise and throw objects
- calmly, but slowly back away and maintain eye contact
- if the wolf does not run away immediately, continue making yourself large, maintaining eye contact, and backing away
- do not turn your back on the wolf and do not runaway

Despite being federally protected, the Endangered Species Act contains a provision that anyone can kill a wolf in self-defense or in defense of others when there is imminent danger.

Montana State Fish & Wildlife, Wolf Management and Human Safety web site, retrieved 12/1/08

### **Rabies**

According to the MN Department of Health, when in the woods employees should avoid any animal that is displaying abnormal or aggressive behavior, or dead animals found.

#### **When should you suspect an animal has rabies?**

You should suspect rabies in animals that show a change in behavior, are found staggering or circling, or appear paralyzed. Wild animals may become unusually tame or unusually aggressive, and they may attack other animals, people, or objects. *If you suspect rabies, do not handle the animal. Seek advice from a veterinarian or your local animal control agency immediately.*

For more information on Rabies, see MN Department of Health web site:

<http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/idepc/diseases/rabies/index.html>