

# BEAR-FREE, WORRY-FREE CAMPING

Easy ways to ensure that black bears and grizzlies stay away from your family's campsite this summer. **BY MIKE RAETHER**



**PICNIC PEST** A black bear awaits another round of visitors at a national forest campground in northwestern Montana. Though exciting to spot from a distance, bears that hang around camping sites can damage gear, scare campers, and, if too persistent, put their own lives at risk.

NEILSON KEMNER

Last summer while camping near St. Regis, Rob Holmes was bitten in the head by a black bear. Holmes, of Washington, was on his first Montana fly-fishing trip. One night he felt a bump against his tent. It was a bear, which bit into the tent and latched onto Holmes's head, almost severing one ear. The camper shouted and scared the animal off, then drove to a nearby hospital, where emergency room staff were able to sew his ear back into place.

Attacks by bears are rare. But visits by

curious or hungry bears to campsites are common, often ruining vacations and scaring campers. In Holmes's case, nearby campers had been careless. They'd left out food, which attracted the bear that bit into Holmes's tent out of curiosity.

"Bears can be anywhere in western, central, and southern Montana," says Erik Wenum, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks bear management specialist, who explains that the state's black and grizzly bear populations continue to grow and expand. "We

have bears showing up where they haven't lived in 30 years. Even if people don't see them, they're there, because bears are experts at not being seen."

That can be unsettling news. Campers want to slide into their sleeping bag and not worry that a bear might come prowling around later that night. Fortunately, by following a few simple precautions offered by Wenum and other wildlife experts, you can keep the animals away from your campsite and enjoy many nights of restful sleep.

want to pick up all food scraps from the campsite every night before bed and double check that nobody accidentally left food, cans, or foil in the fire pit," says Chuck Bartlebaugh, director of the Missoula-based Center For Wildlife Information. "Store all food and garbage in proper containers overnight and whenever you leave your campsite."

Tent and RV campers should keep all edibles in ice chests or storage containers that are placed in vehicles when not in use. The second-best option is to hang foodstuffs from a rope between two trees. Some national forest campgrounds with chronic bear activity offer bear poles (also known as "bear hangs") for hanging foodstuffs; others provide metal storage boxes designed to thwart wildlife.

Backpackers have to be more creative. Because some bears can climb trees, food hung at backcountry campsites must be at least 4 feet away from the trunk or heavy branches and at least 10 feet from the ground. That may require stretching a rope between two trees at least 15 feet apart (and at least 100 yards from the sleeping area). To get the horizontal hang rope high enough off the ground, tie one end of the rope to a rock, fling it up onto a branch of one tree, then do the same with the other end of the rope on the other tree.

In recent years manufacturers have devised lightweight food storage canisters, often called "bear tubes," made of tough, bear-resistant plastic, which are carried in a backpack. Manufacturers and products include Garcia Machine's Backpackers' Cache, BearVault, and Counter Assault's Bear Keg. The tubes weigh 2 to 3 pounds and are designed to hold enough food for one person for about six days. "Shop around and make sure the tube you buy is certified by the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee," Wenum advises. "And don't buy one larger than what you will need. Take your pack with you and buy one that will fit in your pack." Wenum also suggests calling local Forest Service offices; some loan out bear tubes, as do a few camping supply stores. "That's a good way to 'test drive' a tube," he says.

## Food storage

The first consideration for carefree, bear-free camping is proper food storage. You must ensure that bears cannot obtain a single scrap of food or garbage. This prevents the animals from tearing up your campsite and devouring your food. Also, when practiced by all campers, proper food storage deters bears from lingering.

The most important rule is to never store food—even snacks and personal hygiene items such as toothpaste—in a tent. "You also

Like food hung from bear hangs, bear tubes should be stored at least 100 yards from sleeping sites.

A new device deters bears from nearing your food, garbage, or tent in the backcountry. The Pentagon Electric Bear Fence is a portable, battery-powered electric fence enclosure that can be pitched around your tent or food cache. (Even with this added protec-

**"Pick up all food scraps from the campsite every night before bed."**

tion, you still need to properly store your food and separate it from your sleeping area.) Weighing 9 pounds and costing about \$370, the fence is neither light nor cheap, but it carries enough zap to discourage a hungry or inquisitive bear from visiting your food supply or sleeping area.

## Cooking and cleaning

The tantalizing smell of sizzling bacon or fried trout might warm a camper's heart, but it is more than a hungry bear can resist. A bear's sense of smell is many times more acute than a human's. Even something as seemingly safe as breakfast sausage can



Bear tubes, made of tough plastic, can keep food safe from hungry animals.

COUNTER ASSAULT

attract bears from far away. Try to avoid cooking foods that emit strong smells. If possible, cook in an area at least 100 yards away from where you sleep. If available, use a campground's common cooking shelter for preparing, cooking, and eating meals rather than doing so at your campsite. Also, don't cook or eat in the same clothing you wear around the campsite or bring into your tent. Tent and RV campers should place cooking clothes in their vehicle, while backpackers should stash those items with their food away from the campsite.

After a hearty campsite meal, it's tempting to postpone cleanup. But that's just leaving a welcome mat out for bears, which love leftovers and garbage. Developed campsites usually provide garbage disposal facilities. Tent and RV campers visiting undeveloped campsites should use plastic garbage bags and store them out of sight in their vehicle. Backpackers can place garbage and leftovers in special, odor-proof plastic bags (available at outdoor supply stores) and store them with their food.

During cleanup, don't dump leftovers in the fire pit or fling food-laden washing water into nearby bushes. Once the fire goes out and the dishwater dries, enough food will remain to attract bears.

Mike Raether is a writer in St. Regis.



#### What if?

In July 2010 three people were attacked, one fatally, by a grizzly one night at Soda Springs Campground near the northeastern corner of Yellowstone National Park. The incident occurred even though the campers and others nearby had kept their campsites clean and free of food, garbage, and odors.

Bear attacks are uncommon, and fatalities are extremely rare. But even campers

who take all precautions with food may someday come face to face with a bear. That's why it's worth knowing how to protect yourself, just in case.

Some campers believe firearms are the safest deterrent. But firearms can be fatal to people as well as bears, says Wenum. "Think of yourself on the trail with a half dozen other hikers," he says. "You round a corner and surprise a bear. People start running in all directions, and someone pulls out a handgun and starts blasting away. That's a recipe for disaster."

Also, a firearm can unnecessarily kill a bear that is only bluff charging. And if the charge is for real, even expert marksmen can miss a killing shot on a charging bear. That risks wounding the animal and making it angrier.

Wenum and Bartlebaugh say a far more effective option is bear spray, a canister filled with deterrent made from capsaicin and related capsaicinoids. During the day, the canister should be carried in a holster on the waist or across the chest. During sleeping hours, keep bear spray and a flashlight next to your pillow for nighttime bathroom walks and unexpected bear visits.



**HELPING BEARS STAY AWAY** Aided by their keen sense of smell, bears are naturally drawn to food and garbage left out at campsites (facing page). Even small scraps and personal products like toothpaste can attract the large omnivores. To deter bears, campers should hoist food from hang poles found at many national forest campgrounds and national park backcountry campsites (left). Backpackers should pitch their tent at least 100 yards from hung food and cooking areas (right). Though not intended to replace proper food storage, portable electric fencing (above) is a new option for backcountry camping that provides extra safety.



**UNFAIR TO BEARS**  
A food-laden campsite can be a bear's death sentence. After trying scare tactics and multiple relocations, FWP wardens and biologists have to kill 10 to 12 bears each year when the animals, attracted by food, repeatedly raid campsites and put human safety at risk. "A bear that is fed by humans—either intentionally or otherwise—will almost always end up dead because it starts hanging around campsites and has to be removed," says Bartlebaugh. "That's certainly not fair to the bear."



#### FOR MORE INFORMATION

Advice on buying and using bear pepper spray: [fwp.mt.gov/mtoutdoors/HTML/articles/2009/grizzlyencounters.htm](http://fwp.mt.gov/mtoutdoors/HTML/articles/2009/grizzlyencounters.htm)

What to do if you see a bear, if it nears, and if it attacks: [fwp.mt.gov/mtoutdoors/HTML/extra/BearAttack.htm](http://fwp.mt.gov/mtoutdoors/HTML/extra/BearAttack.htm)

Being bear aware: [fwp.mt.gov/wildthings/livingWithWildlife/beBearAware/](http://fwp.mt.gov/wildthings/livingWithWildlife/beBearAware/)

Recent bear activity: The websites of U.S. Forest Service ranger districts often contain advisories on recent bear activity at national forest campgrounds.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: RON HOFF; SAM & STEPH ZIERKE; MONTANA OUTDOORS; STEVEN AKRE