



# wildlife

R E V I E W

UTAH DIVISION OF WILDLIFE RESOURCES

**Don't just grin  
and "bear" it**

*How to camp safely in bear country*

# Don't just grin and "BEAR" IT

## *How to camp safely in bear country*

by Scott Root

*Central Region Conservation Outreach Manager*

**T**he June 17 black bear attack that led to the tragic death of 11-year-old Samuel Ives has made people across Utah and across the country more "bear aware."

Many people who plan on going into the great outdoors will always remember this tragic event. While this tragedy may cause a little more fear in people than is



**This bear ran up a tree when biologists approached it.**

necessary, it should also cause all of us to take bears more seriously.

According to the Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms, the term “grin and bear it” means “to accept an unpleasant or difficult situation because there is nothing you can do to improve it.”

Luckily, that isn’t the case with bears. There are several

things you can do to improve the chance that you won't run into an unpleasant or difficult situation.

## **Bears, bears everywhere**

During June 2007, it seemed like black bears were coming "out of the woodwork" in Utah. About 15 different bear incidents occurred that month in the north-central part of Utah alone. Some folks in that part of the state probably felt like they were living through a bad B-grade movie titled "The Year of the Bear."

When lots of bear sightings occur, many people begin to wonder if the bears are out "to get people." That is simply not the case. During most of the encounters in June, the bears did not show any aggression towards people. And most of the bears left the area they were in after being scared away by people or dogs.

These first-time offenders caused minimal or no damage. They're considered "Level One" bears in the Division of Wildlife Resource's Black Bear Policy. Level One bears are bears that exhibit no aggression towards

people. The DWR usually traps these bears and relocates them.

If these bears return to an area and exhibit behavior that's unacceptable—but they pose no immediate threat to property, people or livestock—they're categorized as "Level Two" bears. After they're trapped, a part of these bears is often spray-painted blue for future identification. Then the bears are relocated to a new area.

"Level Three" bears are bears that keep coming to areas where people are, bears that have caused significant property damage to a dwelling, or bears that are deemed a threat to public safety. A bear is considered a threat to public safety if it displays aggressive behavior towards people, has little fear of people, or has killed or attempted to kill domestic pets. In these situations, DWR policy requires that the bear be destroyed.

The DWR takes all bear sightings seriously. We encourage you to notify us if you see a bear near a home, a campground or any other area where people visit. However, if you encounter a bear in the forest, you don't need to notify us unless the bear acts aggressively.

## **Mostly young bears**

Many of the bear incidents in June 2007 involved young bears that were about 16 months old.

Sows (mother bears) generally kick their cubs away at this age, knowing that they should be able to fend for themselves. She separates from them so she can breed again and raise more cubs. She is also doing the cubs a favor because a large male bear (called a boar) may attempt to kill the cubs as he approaches the sow to mate.



**Blonde-colored black bear is lured into barrel-type trap.**

After being kicked out, the young and newly-independent bears must use their built-in sense of smell to survive. “Follow your nose” is truly a bear behavior.

Some of the bear sightings in June resulted from a bear following its nose to water and food sources. I noticed that the areas where most of the bear sightings occurred, including Park City, Provo Canyon, Spanish Fork Canyon and Woodland Hills, were adjacent to rivers or ponds (water sources) or to food sources, including garbage dumpsters.

## **Protecting the public**

A bear’s keen gift of smell is a “double-edged sword.” It can help the bear survive, but it can also lead to its death.

One of the incidents that took place in June happened near Strawberry Reservoir.

Cabin owners in the area burned a meal they were cooking, so they opened the doors and windows of their cabin. Then they went for a short walk while the cabin aired out.

When they returned, they found that the screen on the

cabin's front door was destroyed. They looked inside the cabin and were surprised to see a bear in their kitchen, eating their burnt dinner.

When the bear saw them, it broke through a window screen and left the cabin. But that's when the bear made a fatal mistake: it wouldn't leave the area.

Residents of the cabin community (which included many young children) were concerned, and they called the DWR. Conservation officers responded to the area immediately.

The officers used cracker (noise) shells and other methods to try and scare the bear away. But every time they scared the bear away, it came back.

It was clear that the bear was not afraid of people. According to the DWR's bear policy, the officers had to euthanize the bear because it posed a risk to public safety.

## **Is it safe to camp and hike in Utah?**

Media coverage about bear incidents like this can cause people to be fearful about hiking and camping. But

this fear is rarely justified. The DWR encourages you to get outdoors and enjoy camping and hiking in Utah. If you do come across a bear in the outdoors, DWR Mammals Program Coordinator Kevin Bunnell explains what will likely happen.

“The most common response you will have from a bear is that it will simply run away,” Bunnell says. “And in a lot of cases, you won’t even see it. You may hear something crashing through the trees or simply see a quick flash of the bear running away from you.

“Black bears have very keen senses, and in most cases they will know you are there before you know they are there. They typically are going to take off running.”

## **How to avoid contact**

As I mentioned earlier, bears have a keen sense of smell. They can smell a variety of things, including insects; sugar water in hummingbird feeders; soap, perfume and deodorants in your camp; and bacon, sausage and other foods at your camp site.

Keeping your camping, cabin or home site clean is

the key to discouraging bears from visiting. Here's an example of one simple thing you can do:

One of the best parts of camping is enjoying a warm breakfast on a cold morning. After breakfast, a frying pan full of hot butter or grease is usually left over. This bacon or sausage-smelling liquid often ends up getting poured into the bushes near your camp. It's easy for bears to smell this.

A simple way to prevent bears from smelling the grease is to allow it to cool. Then put the grease in a plastic container that has a lid on it. After snapping the lid shut, put the container in the trunk of your car, and leave it there until you can dispose of it properly.

You should always keep all of your food in airtight containers while camping. Other simple things you can do to avoid problems with bears are available in the DWR's free "Living in Black Bear Country" brochure. The brochure is available at [www.wildlife.utah.gov/bear](http://www.wildlife.utah.gov/bear).

*Jill Taylor*



**Bears love the sugar water in hummingbird feeders.**

## **Black bears in the wild**

Biologists estimate that between 2,000 to 4,000 black

bears live in Utah.

Black bears can be black, brown, cinnamon-red or even blonde in color. In fact, a large percentage of the black bears that live in Utah are not black in color. The DWR often receives reports from people who think they've seen a grizzly bear when they've actually seen a black bear that's brown or blonde in color.

Seeing a black bear is always a memorable experience, whether it causes you to shed tears of joy or tears of fear!

If you're lucky enough to see a black bear, here are some steps to take if the bear acts aggressively (which, again, is very rare):

- raise your arms to make yourself appear bigger.
- make a lot of noise (which may come naturally, if you are terrified of bears)! Making noise will usually scare a curious bear away.
- avoid direct eye contact, and back away from the bear slowly. Don't run: that will trigger a predator action in the bear that will cause it to chase you.

And while this should never happen to you, if a bear

does attack you, fight back! Do not play dead with a black bear.

Many hikers like to carry pepper spray with them as a safety precaution. You can also protect yourself with a firearm, but you may not shoot at a bear unless it's acting aggressively. Shooting a bear for the simple fact that you're afraid of bears is against the law. 🐻