

# more about Polar Bears

Polar bears are the largest land carnivore in North America. An adult male typically weighs 300-450 kg, stretching 3 metres from nose to tail. They are strong, fast, agile, on land or ice, and are expert swimmers and divers. Their sense of smell is exceptional, their eyesight comparable to a human's. Polar bears are naturally curious, not fearless as they have been labelled. They are shy and prefer to avoid confrontations with humans and other polar bears. Their primary prey is the ringed seal but they will also prey on birds, eggs, small mammals, and even humans. They also scavenge anything from beached whales to human garbage. In the heat of summer, polar bears may appear slow and docile, but they are capable of moving swiftly and with purpose.

This pamphlet was developed for National Parks in the Arctic. Polar bears in the Hudson's Bay area have different adaptations and behaviour. If you plan on visiting Wapusk National Park, ask for further information at: (204) 675-8863 or [wapusk\\_np@pch.gc.ca](mailto:wapusk_np@pch.gc.ca)

CREDIT: Bromley, Marianne. 1996. *Safety in Polar Bear Country*. Northwest Territories Renewable Resources, Yellowknife, NWT. 24 pp.

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## Polar Bear Conservation

Nanuq, the great white bear, is found in many of Canada's northern national parks and in some national historic sites. Whenever bears and people occupy the same area, conflict can arise. Polar bears and people have coexisted for thousands of years but contact between the two must be minimised to continue this legacy. Successful polar bear conservation requires your co-operation.

**For your safety, and the safety of the bears, learn about safe travel in polar bear country and take precautions.** By choosing to travel in polar bear country you not only accept the associated risks, but also the responsibility to alter your plans, actions and attitudes to accommodate these magnificent animals.

**Report all polar bear sightings and signs to park staff, as soon as possible.**

### For more information:

**Auyiittuq and Quttinirpaq National Parks**  
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PHONE: **867.473.8828**  
E-MAIL: [Nunavut\\_Info@pch.gc.ca](mailto:Nunavut_Info@pch.gc.ca)

**Sirmilik National Park**  
Box 300  
Pond Inlet, Nunavut X0A 0S0  
PHONE: **867.899.8092**  
E-MAIL: [Sirmilik.info@pch.gc.ca](mailto:Sirmilik.info@pch.gc.ca)

**Parks Canada Western Arctic Field Unit**  
Box 1840  
Inuvik, NT X0E 0T0  
PHONE: **867.777.8800**  
E-MAIL: [Inuvik\\_info@pch.gc.ca](mailto:Inuvik_info@pch.gc.ca)

**Margo Supplies**  
A supplier of bear deterrents and warning devices.  
<http://www.wildlife-mgmt.com/beardeterrents.htm>

# Safety

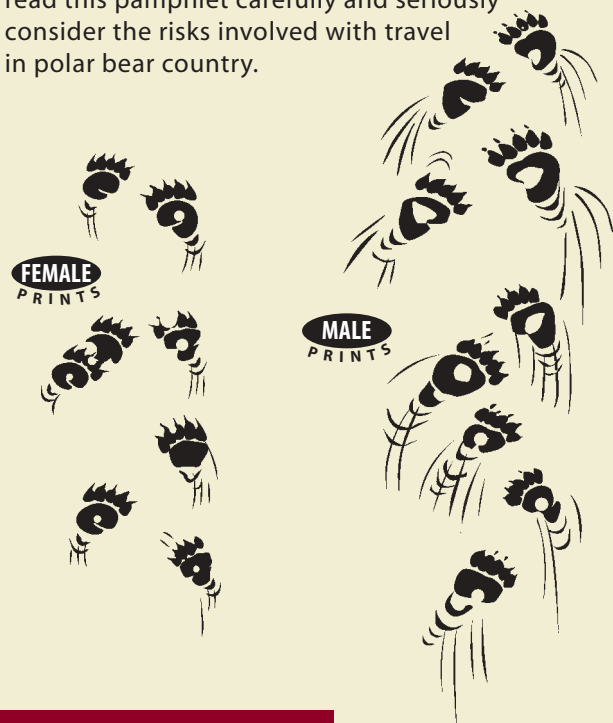


in  
**Polar Bear**  
C O U N T R Y

## Safety in Polar Bear Country

### Each encounter with a polar bear is unique.

Good judgement, common sense and familiarity with polar bear behaviour are required in all situations. This pamphlet provides guidelines for avoiding and dealing with polar bear encounters. For your safety and the safety of the bears, please read this pamphlet carefully and seriously consider the risks involved with travel in polar bear country.



### Polar bear behaviour is very different from that of grizzly and black bears.

Polar bears are predators, primarily hunting seals, while grizzlies and black bears mostly eat plants. As predators, polar bears will investigate humans, their camps and may even consider humans as a food source.

PAUL NICKLEN

# avoiding an encounter

#### Ask Parks Canada staff about current bear activity.

Some areas may be closed due to bear activity; obey written and oral warnings.

#### Be alert and aware of your surroundings.

Scan all around with binoculars at regular intervals. Be vigilant! Watch for signs such as tracks, droppings, diggings, wildlife carcasses and polar bear dens.

#### Travel in daylight and avoid areas of restricted visibility.

Be especially careful in areas along the coast, where a polar bear may be hidden behind boulders, pressure ridges (pushed up sea ice), driftwood or vegetation.

#### Travel in groups and stay together to increase your safety.

The larger the group the greater the chances of deterring a bear.

#### Never approach a bear for any reason.

Every bear defends a "critical space", which varies with each bear and each situation: it may be a few metres or a hundred metres. Intrusion within this space is considered a threat and may provoke an attack.

#### Never approach a fresh kill or carcass as polar bears will defend their food.

Adult polar bears will often only eat the fat of seals and other kills, but other bears may scavenge from these carcasses.

#### Never feed bears or any wildlife.

A bear that finds food from a human source begins to associate humans with food. This can result in the bear losing its natural tendency to avoid people and becoming persistent in its search for human food. The consequences for you and the bear can be serious. A bear that associates food with humans is more likely to injure people and these bears may have to be relocated or killed.

#### Pack out all garbage and use sealed bags and containers or bear-proof canisters to store food and garbage.

#### Eliminate or reduce odours from yourself and your camp.

Avoid using scented soaps and cosmetics and avoid bringing strong smelling foods.

#### Consider hiring a guide if you are uncertain about your ability to deal with polar bears.

Ask about their experience, how they will avoid encountering a polar bear and about plans of action should you encounter a bear. A larger group can also increase safety, ask about the size of group.



## Choosing a Safe Campsite

### Avoid bear feeding areas.

A polar bear's primary food source is seal so these species are often found in the same places.

- **In fall, winter and early spring** most polar bears are on the sea ice hunting seals by the floe edge, open water leads and along pressure ridges. Bears and seals can also be found in places where the ice is thin or cracked, such as tide cracks in land-fast ice or at toes of glaciers. Seals can more easily maintain breathing holes in these areas.
- **In early spring**, females with cubs tend to hunt along pressure ridges and cracks in land-fast ice (particularly in bays) where seal birthing dens are found.
- **During the ice-free summer season**, when polar bears are forced ashore, they generally hunt and scavenge along coastlines, beaches and rocky islands near the coast.

### Stay away from polar bear den sites.

Unlike other bears, there is no time when all polar bears are inactive in dens.

- **Maternity dens** are excavated by pregnant females in snow drifts on leeward (wind protected) slopes of coastal hills and valleys. In the Baffin Region, dens can be found at high elevations on snowfields and glaciers. Maternity dens are occupied from fall to early spring. The dens are inconspicuous, however, bear tracks leading to and from the site in early autumn or late spring or ventilation holes can indicate their presence.
- **Temporary dens** are excavated in snow drifts or pressure ridges by polar bears (males, females and females with cubs) that are active over the winter. The dens can be used as resting places or as temporary shelter from bad weather. They can be used from a few days to several months.
- **Summer retreat dens** are excavated during the open water season in the remaining snow banks or into the permafrost. These can also be at higher elevations on snowfields and glaciers or the valleys leading up to them. Male and female bears of all age groups use them to keep cool and avoid insect

# handling an encounter

### Before your trip, discuss possible plans of action for dealing with bears in a variety of circumstances and be sure everyone understands.

The actions of each individual either contribute to or detract from the safety of everyone else.

### Stay calm and assess the situation.

What is the bear doing? What is the bear's behaviour?

### If a bear does not know you are there:

- **quietly back away and leave the area** either in the direction you came or make a wide detour around the bear. Do not run, move quickly or make motions that might attract the bear's attention.
- **stay downwind, if possible**, so the bear cannot smell you and detect your presence.
- **keep an eye on the bear.**

### If a bear knows you are there and shows signs of being curious, such as:

- moving slowly with frequent stops,
- standing on hind legs and sniffing the air,
- holding its head high with ears forward or to the side,
- moving its head from side to side, or
- trying to catch your scent by circling downwind and approaching from behind.

#### THEN:

- **help it to identify you as a human,**
- **wave your arms over your head and talk in low tones,**
- **move slowly upwind** of the bear so it can get your scent.

### If the bear has been surprised at close

### If a bear charges:

- **stand your ground and be prepared to fight!** Bluff charges are rare.

### Never get between a bear and her cubs.

If a female with cubs is surprised at close range or separated from her cubs she will likely attack to defend her cubs.

- **leave the area immediately.**
- **stay in a group.**
- **fight back if she attacks.**



**Always leave an escape route for the bear.**

**Carry deterrents and know how to use them.**

**Report all polar bear sightings and signs to park staff.**

## deterrents

Reducing the threat posed by a polar bear during an interaction may be difficult. Non-lethal deterrents have been developed for black and grizzly bears but they have not been thoroughly tested on polar bears and, therefore, they cannot be depended on to ensure safety. **The best way to live safely with bears is to avoid contact with**

groups use them to keep cool and avoid insect harassment.

### **Avoid camping on beaches, islands, along coastlines and on "bear highways".**

- Before making camp, look around for tracks.
- Polar bears often travel along coastlines using points of land and rocky islets near the coast to navigate.
- In the summer, blowing sea ice may transport polar bears into coastal areas. Avoid areas where the pack ice is blowing in to shore.
- Valleys and passes are often used to cross peninsulas and to move from one valley to another.
- Polar bears travel and hunt along the edges of ice floes.

### **Camp inland on a butte or bluff with a good view of surrounding terrain.**

Avoid areas where bears might hide, such as blind corners, snow banks, pressure ridges and other visual impediments.

### **Set up tents in a line rather than a circle and maintain at least 5 metres between them.**

If a bear comes into camp, it will not feel surrounded and will have an avenue of escape without feeling threatened.

### **Do not sleep in the open without a tent.**

You may look like a seal and polar bears are very curious. People sleeping in the open have been attacked.

### **Cook at least 50 metres from your sleeping area in a place visible from your tent.**

Strain food particles from dishwater and store with garbage. Dump dishwater at least 50 metres from your sleeping area, rivers, streams and lakes.

### **Store food and garbage in bear-proof containers or sealed bags and containers secured under rocks within view of your tent.**

Placing pots on top may serve as an alarm. If you have a warning system, store your food within its perimeter. DO NOT store food inside your tent.

### **Bury human waste under rocks at least 50 metres from your sleeping area or pack it out.**

### **If the bear has been surprised at close range or shows signs of being agitated or threatened, such as:**

- huffing, panting, hissing, growling or jaw-snapping,
- stamping its feet,
- staring directly at a person, or
- lowering its head with ears laid back.

#### **THEN:**

- **act non-threatening.** Do not shout or make sudden movements, which might provoke the bear. Never huff or hiss as this can cause a polar bear to charge.
- **avoid direct eye contact.**
- **back away slowly.** DO NOT RUN.
- **be prepared to use deterrents.**

### **If the bear shows signs of stalking or hunting you, such as:**

- following you or circling you,
- approaching directly, intently and unafraid,
- returning after being scared away, or
- appears wounded, old or thin.

#### **THEN:**

- **fight back!** Use any potential weapon, group together and make loud noises.
- **DO NOT RUN.**
- **be prepared to use deterrents.**

to live safely with bears is to avoid contact with them.

**Any potential weapon should be considered,** such as skis, poles, rocks, blocks of ice or even knives.

**Stay together as a group.** This can be a deterrent and actions, such as making noise, jumping, waving arms, throwing things, may help to drive a polar bear away.

## **Commercial deterrents:**

- **Noisemakers** including air horns, pistol and pen launched bear bangers may scare a bear away.
- **Pepper spray** may work on polar bears, but has not been thoroughly tested. Be aware that pepper spray does not work when cold. Also be aware of wind direction to avoid having the spray blow into your face.
- **Know how and when to use these deterrents and practice beforehand.**
- **Availability of commercial deterrents is limited in the north,** most will have to be purchased elsewhere and transported as dangerous goods.
- Contact Parks Canada for more information.

**In National Parks of Canada it is unlawful to possess a firearm without a permit.** The exception to this regulation is for beneficiaries of the Inuvialuit Final Agreement and Nunavut Land Claim Agreement; they may carry firearms when engaged in traditional activities within National Parks in their land claim area.

# warningsystems

**Set up a portable trip-wire or motion detector alarm system around your tent** to alert you if a polar bear approaches your camp. Before leaving home, contact Parks Canada for more information.

**You may wish to take a dog, but only one that has proven experience with polar bears.** Several dogs

are better than one. Know how to handle them. Keep them staked so they cannot run to you for protection and stake them downwind from your sleeping area. Be sure to clean up any dog food leftovers. Dogs must be under control at all times within national parks to avoid wildlife harassment.

**Designate a bear monitor** to keep watch if a polar bear might be nearby. Consider moving your camp if there is a bear in the area.

**Report ALL polar bear sightings and signs to park staff, as soon as possible.**