



Wildlife Safety Messaging

Wildlife Safety Messages

Wildlife safety messages are required as part of all bus trips, interpretive programs and any activity in Denali National Park and Preserve during which an encounter is possible. This applies to the work of park partners operating under contract or permit in the park as well as to NPS staff. It is essential that professionals interacting with the public in Denali know and understand this information as well as use it to provide consistent messaging. Consistency creates clarity for visitors who might interact with a variety of people communicating wildlife safety messages on their visit to Denali. Each time visitors hear the same message it also helps to reinforce their response to wildlife.

Communicators of wildlife safety messages are expected to exercise professionalism, skill and creativity to present messages that are appropriate to various audiences and situations. Communicators are encouraged to explore techniques that actively engage audiences or test visitor knowledge. The appropriate length, tone and level of detail for wildlife safety messages will vary depending on the specific type of program, location and audience needs.

- A **detailed**, comprehensive discussion *and* demonstration of what visitors should do during wildlife encounters are considered essential for all guided hikes or walks. Detailed messaging should also be provided to any visitors who will be camping or hiking. This is especially important if they are not guided (e.g. independent travelers and passengers on shuttle, transit or camper buses).
- A bus tour on which visitor exposure to wildlife is present at rest stops, albeit limited to short durations, should at least present the **main** talking points. Providing this consistent messaging is also a critical service to those visitors who might explore the park on their own after a tour.
- For an interpretive talk or an illustrated program, providing the **essential** messages and suggesting that visitors seek out more information are more appropriate. For flights on which visitors may not be on the ground, sharing the essential messages can be helpful, as those same visitors will likely end up somewhere else in the park where a wildlife encounter is possible.

The goal of wildlife safety messaging is to instill a sense of shared responsibility for the visitor to respect wildlife, to prevent negative encounters from happening, and for all of us to be stewards in keeping wildlife healthy and wild. All wildlife safety messaging can be summarized by the following statement: Respect wildlife by *preventing* an encounter, *responding* appropriately to their presence, and *reporting* encounters with wildlife that affect its behavior or cause concerns for human safety. See the essential, main, and detailed messaging that follows.

*Essential messages about wildlife safety in Denali:

- Prevention is key: be alert, make noise, hike in groups, and carry bear spray
- Keep your distance, never approach or feed wildlife, and always secure food and trash properly
- Run from a moose if necessary
- Never run from a bear; respond appropriately to its behavior
- If you encounter a bear, never leave food or gear behind
- Never allow a wolf to approach
- Report wildlife encounters

*Main Talking Points:

Being prepared and knowing what to do in wildlife country reduce incidents with wildlife and people.

- Prevention

Be alert

Make noise

Hike in groups

Carry bear spray

Keep your distance (minimum 25 yards, except bears, which is 300 yards)

Never approach or feed wildlife

Secure food and trash properly

- Respond Appropriately

Moose:

Give them space

What does the **moose's** behavior look like?

1. Stares at you, head lowered, ears back, or hackles raised
 - a. *Move away immediately and quickly*
2. Begins to charge
 - a. *Run away immediately and quickly*

Bear:

Stay calm

If a hard-sided structure or vehicle is easily accessible, get into it

Get out bear spray

Never run

Never leave anything for a bear to investigate

What does the **bear's** behavior look like?

1. You see a bear and the bear doesn't see you or doesn't care (you are in its path of travel / no reaction from the bear / returns to feeding)
 - a. *Quietly re-route to maintain distance*
 - b. *Don't call attention to yourself*
2. The bear sees you and acts curious (approaches slowly, often indirectly / circles / gives you the side-eye)
 - a. *Identify yourself as human (talk sharply and wave arms)*
 - b. *Group together and stand your ground (be intimidating)*
 - c. *Appear threatening and be aggressive ("don't mess with me!")*
 - d. *Use bear spray if approached*
 - e. *Fight back if contacted*
3. The bear is threatened or defensive (appears agitated or charges)
 - a. *Talk calmly and softly ("I'm not a threat")*
 - b. *Group together*
 - c. *Appear non-threatening, if given the opportunity slowly back away (de-escalate situation)*
 - d. *Stand your ground and use bear spray if charged*
 - e. *Play dead if contacted*

Wolf: Essentially the same as a curious bear

● **Report:**

1. Any bear or wolf interactions (wherein the animal's behavior is changed in any way due to the presence of a human/s) that occur must be reported using the appropriate form.
2. NPS wildlife staff should be immediately notified anytime an animal makes contact with a human, damages property, continually approaches an area occupied by humans, touches a tent, or shows signs of aggression or excitement toward a human.

***Detailed Talking Points:**

Preventing an encounter is the primary way to stay safe in situations which wildlife may be present. Understanding and reacting appropriately to wildlife behavior are critical to reducing the escalation or severity during encounters.

Detailed Talking points for **prevention of wildlife encounters:**

- While hiking, be alert and maintain "situational awareness." Pay attention to surroundings and choose routes with good visibility when possible.
- All hikers should make noise using their normal human voices to reduce the chance of a surprise encounter.
- Never approach or feed wildlife no matter how small or large.
- Regardless of distance or circumstances, if any wild animal changes its behavior due to your presence, you are too close.
- Maintain required minimum safe distances from wild animals. In this park, the required minimum distance for most wild animals is 25 yards, about the same distance as two shuttle buses parked end-to-end. For bears, the required minimum distance is 300 yards, about the same distance as three football fields.
- Never drop or leave anything for an animal to investigate. Keep food, trash and scented items secure at all times. As well intentioned or unintentional as they may be, treats, scraps and crumbs are harmful to the health and wellbeing of all wildlife.
- When eating outdoors, do not spread out picnic-style. You should be able to pick up all food and items at a moment's notice.
- Dispose of food in bear-resistant garbage cans and dumpsters. Be sure lids latch securely before walking away.
- For those camping at campgrounds, do not put food in bathroom trash cans. Dispose of gray water safely: Riley Creek CG has drains in the middle of the restrooms; Savage River CG has flush toilets for gray water; Teklanika River CG has gray water drains next to the bathrooms; Wonder Lake CG has a dishwashing sink and drain by the restrooms.

Detailed Talking points for encounters with **moose:**

- Moose are faster and much less docile than they may appear.
- A cow moose protecting her calves can be especially hazardous. Cow moose use their hooves to kick, trample, and maim. People have been killed in Alaska by agitated cow moose.
- Moose tend to be particularly aggressive toward people who are walking dogs; walking dogs is allowed on roads and on some trails in the park but is not recommended during the moose calving season for that reason.
- The threshold for how comfortable a moose is in your presence is unpredictable. Although park regulation dictates that you should be no closer than 25 yards to a moose, often a greater distance is required.

- If a moose turns toward you, stares, lowers its head, turns its ears back or raises its hackles, you are too close. Move away immediately and quickly.
- If a moose charges you, run away. Dodge quickly behind large trees, cars or structures. If you are chased while caught out in the open, zigzag or change direction often. Always put as much distance, as quickly as you can, between you and a charging moose.

Detailed Talking points for encounters with **bears**:

- Be alert to your surroundings. Watch for signs such as scat, tracks and animal trails.
- Whenever possible, hike with a group of at least three people.
- Alert bears and other wildlife to your presence by making noise. Nothing else in the outdoors sounds like the human voice, so sing, shout or talk. Your voice is the best choice.
- Never run from a bear. Running will often trigger an instinct in bears to chase prey animals. Bears are quite capable of out-running even the fastest human Olympic sprinter.
- In any situation, never throw food, your pack, or any other personal item at a bear in an attempt to distract it. A bear that gets a reward will likely try to get that reward again and potentially approach other people.
- If a bear is less than 300 yards away *and* a hard-sided structure or vehicle is present and easily accessible, get everyone into it.
- If you see a bear in the distance that doesn't appear to notice you, goes back to its normal behavior, or moves away from you, quietly re-route to avoid it. If you are already too close (less than 300 yards), retreat or re-route immediately and slowly – just because a bear isn't visibly responding to your presence does not mean it is not aware of you.
- If you are in the bear's path of travel (e.g. on a trail), stay calm and slowly move away from the path of travel.
- If you see a bear from any distance that shows any interest and approaches you, your reaction should be determined by its behavior
- A **curious** bear will often approach slowly and indirectly from the side, or sometimes a curious bear's path of travel will parallel yours. A curious bear may give you side-eye versus staring directly at you.
 - If you have an encounter with a curious bear: stay calm. Get your bear spray out and ready. Stand your ground, make yourself look big and mean, gather your group together. Your objective in this situation is APPEAR THREATENING. Be aggressive in your movements and noises. Look threatening; the idea is to scare the bear away. If the bear continues to approach within range of the bear spray, use it. If a curious bear attacks, it is likely a predatory attack. DO NOT PLAY DEAD; fight back with all the energy and objects you have available, such as walking sticks, or rocks.
- A **threatened or defensive** bear will move directly toward you. It will be walking fast or running. A threatened or defensive bear will sometimes charge. It is not uncommon for bears to charge multiple times. A threatened bear will stare directly at you with a fixed gaze. It will appear agitated and often vocalize with a huffing sound and open and close its mouth quickly, which makes a popping noise (called jaw popping). It will appear threatening, trying to scare you away.
 - If you have a close encounter with a threatened or defensive bear: it is absolutely critical in this situation to STAY CALM. Get your bear spray out. Your objective in this situation is to de-escalate the situation by APPEARING NON-THREATENING. Again, gather your group together and look big, but not aggressively threatening, attempting to de-escalate the situation. Move slowly and talk softly to the bear. If the bear gives you the opportunity, slowly back away. If you feel that the bear intends to make contact with you, use your bear spray. If the bear does make contact with you, fall to the ground,

PLAY DEAD and keep your pack on your back and interlace your fingers around the back of your neck to protect your spine. Curl into a fetal position to protect your vital organs. Do not resist. Remain as non-threatening as possible. If you are attacked by a defensive bear, make sure that the bear has left the area before you move.

Detailed Talking points for encounters with **wolves**:

- A wolf that doesn't act wary around humans is potentially dangerous.
- Do *nothing* to encourage a wolf to approach you.
- If a wolf does approach, make noise, group up with other people, try to look big and intimidating and try to frighten it away. In the unusual event that a wolf continues to approach you, throw sticks or rocks in its direction, but don't seek to hit or injure it unless necessary. Consider using bear spray. Never throw food, your pack or any other personal item at a wolf to distract it.
- Wolf attacks are extraordinarily rare. A wolf that is about to attack is unlikely to growl, bare its teeth or give any signs you might expect from a dog.
- If a wolf ever does attack you, fight back. Never run and never play dead.

Detailed Talking points for **reporting** wildlife encounters:

- Any bear interactions (wherein a bear's behavior is changed in any way due to the presence of a human/s) that occur must be reported using a Bear Human Incident Management System (BHIMS) form.
- Any wolf interactions (wherein a wolf's behavior is changed in any way due to the presence of a human/s) that occur should be reported using a Wolf Encounter Form (WEF).
- NPS wildlife staff should be immediately notified anytime an animal makes contact with a human, damages property, continually approaches an area occupied by humans, touches a tent, or shows signs of aggression or excitement toward a human.

For more information, see <https://www.nps.gov/dena/planyourvisit/safety.htm>

Talking Points and Instructions for Carrying and Using Bear Spray

Denali National Park and Preserve recommends that all hikers carry bear spray.

In closed spaces, such as vehicles and buildings, bear spray canisters should be stored in a sealable plastic bag to prevent spray from spreading in an accidental detonation of the contents.

All guides who carry bear spray should be trained:

- To know how to use bear spray.
- To be prepared to answer visitor questions about bear spray.
- To use their interpretive skills to determine appropriate times to introduce bear spray as a worthwhile investment for visitors who expect to spend time outdoors in Alaska.
- To treat bear spray like a loaded weapon- it can be harmful if used improperly.

In instances in which demonstration of safe use of bear spray is appropriate, narrated steps include:

- Unfastening a Velcro strap and removing a canister of bear spray from a nylon holster. State that this holster should be within quick reach to make carrying bear spray worthwhile. It won't do any good during a surprise encounter buried inside a pack or pocket.
- Pantomime popping off the plastic safety clip and gripping the canister with two hands.

- Take a moment to note wind direction and adjust aim as necessary.
- Aim at a shallow angle toward the ground in front of the bear as it moves closer.
- Pantomime blasts of spray in short bursts that sweep slowly from side-to-side when the bear is 30 feet away. State that the goal is to create a cloud through which a charging bear will run.
- Use a good dose, holding the trigger for about 2-3 seconds, but also keeping some bear spray in reserve for another attack.
- Be careful that residue doesn't wind up in visitors' eyes through a secondary source of contamination, such as clothes or hands.
- Leave an area where bear spray has been deployed as soon as possible because the scent can quickly become a wildlife attractant.
- Get to safety and, for the safety of others, report the incident to a ranger or uniformed park staff member as soon as possible.

If visitors ask about how to dispose of a bear spray canister:

- Remind them they will not be able to carry or check it on a commercial aircraft.
- Let them know that NPS rangers can collect canisters, used or unused. If visitors offer it to you and you are in a position to accept it, find out whether the can is unused, partially discharged or fully discharged. Attach a note to the canister indicating one of these three descriptions. If you decide to accept it, place the canister in a sealable bag for proper storage.
- If you are *not* in a position to accept the canister, let visitors know they can give it to rangers at the EVC, Toklat Tent, or DVC. Visitors at campgrounds can be encouraged to give discarded bear spray directly to a ranger, rather than leaving it behind in the campground bear lockers.
- If they ask about trash disposal, you can inform them that a completely empty aerosol canister may be double-bagged and disposed in the trash. In this case, you should explicitly discourage them from discharging a canister while in the park or anywhere the spray may attract wildlife.

Efficacy of Bear Deterrent Spray in Alaska

The following is an abstract from a peer reviewed article. The complete article can be viewed at: <https://bearwise.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/efficacy-of-bear-spray-smith-et-al.-2010.pdf>.

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ABSTRACT

We present a comprehensive look at a sample of bear spray incidents that occurred in Alaska, USA, from 1985 to 2006. We analyzed 83 bear spray incidents involving brown bears (*Ursus arctos*; 61 cases, 74%), black bears (*Ursus americanus*; 20 cases, 24%), and polar bears (*Ursus maritimus*; 2 cases, 2%). Of the 72 cases where persons sprayed bears to defend themselves, 50 (69%) involved brown bears, 20 (28%) black bears, and 2 (3%) polar bears. Red pepper spray stopped bears' undesirable behavior 92% of the time when used on brown bears, 90% for black bears, and 100% for polar bears. Of all persons carrying sprays, 98% were uninjured by bears in close-range encounters. All bear inflicted injuries (n=3) associated with defensive spraying involved brown bears and were relatively minor (i.e., no hospitalization required). In 7% (5 of 71) of bear spray incidents, wind was reported to have interfered with spray accuracy, although it reached the bear in all cases. In 14% (10 of 71) of bear spray incidents, users reported the spray having had negative side effects upon themselves, ranging from minor irritation (11%, 8 of 71) to near incapacitation (3%, 2 of 71). Bear spray represents an effective alternative to lethal force and should be considered as an option for personal safety for those recreating and working in bear country. (JOURNAL OF WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT 72(3):640–645; 2008).