



2008 Summary of Brown and Black Bear Activity

General Overview

There were 16 bear-human interactions reported in Kenai Fjords National Park (KEFJ) in 2008. All of the known bears involved in these reports were black bears (*Ursus americanus*). There were no injuries to either humans or bears. The greatest number of interactions occurred in July ($n=5$) followed by June ($n=3$), August ($n=3$) and September ($n=3$), and May ($n=2$).

Bear-human interactions occur when bears and humans are mutually aware of each other, and are classified as either encounters or incidents. Bear-human encounters include all cases of bears responding to the presence of humans with indifference, curiosity, avoidance, stress, or surprise that do not result in a charge, property damage, or physical contact. Bear-human incidents are bear-human interactions involving damage or loss of property, garbage or food, unusual behavior on the part of the bear, charges, physical contact, and extreme evasive action in response to a bear (such as bear pepper spray or firearm use). Of the 16 bear-human interactions reported in the park in 2008, there were 11 encounters and five incidents.

The number of bear-human interactions in the park was markedly lower in 2008 than in the previous three years, and there were no reports of bears obtaining human food or garbage this year.



Female brown bear and cub travel up the Resurrection River.

Bear Observations

Notable or unusual bear sightings are also documented on Kenai Fjords National Park Natural History Field Observation Forms. A bear sighting or observation occurs when a person sees a bear, but the bear is apparently unaware of the person. Black bears are frequently seen by staff and visitors throughout the park. Due to the frequency of such sightings only notable or unusual bear observations are collected such as black bear family groups and brown bears (*Ursus arctos*) which are much less common. In 2008, there were 33 bear observations reported; 17 involving black bears and 16 involving brown bears.

Of the 16 brown bear sightings reported in 2008, seven involved single bears and eight involved females with offspring. Six of these sightings were of a female with two cubs of the year. All of the brown bear sightings were from the Exit Glacier area except for one at Nuka Bay.

Brown bears were observed from May to August; with most observations occurring in June and July.

The first bear observation of the year was a set of tracks in the snow in mid-May.

Of the 17 black bear observations reported on wildlife observation cards, 15 of these sightings were from the Exit Glacier area, one was on the coast, and one was on the Harding Icefield. Eight were single bears and nine were females with cubs. Five of these sightings were of females with one cub of the year and two sightings were of a female with three cubs of the year. Ages of cubs were not reported for one sighting of a female with two cubs and another sighting of a female with one cub. All of the family groups were reports from Exit Glacier.

Both black and brown bears were observed playing in snow in avalanche chutes and there were several reports of black bears crossing the face of Exit Glacier.

Bear-Human Encounters

There were 11 reports of bear-human encounters in KEFJ in 2008, all involving black bears. Seven of these occurred at Exit Glacier and four encounters were reported on the coast (McMullen, Beauty Bay, and Aialik Bay Ranger Station). These 11 bear-human encounters can be grouped into four categories: 1) bears approaching human use areas ($n=1$); 2) habituated or tolerant bears encountered in their natural habitat ($n=4$); 3) surprise encounters of close proximity where the bear showed signs of excitement ($n=4$); and 4) curious bears that remained in an area with people present ($n=2$).

There was one encounter involving a bear approaching a place of human use, the Exit Glacier picnic area. A visitor observed a bear walking down the paved trail and entering the picnic area. The bear climbed on the picnic table and licked it. No people were in the picnic area at the time and no food reward was acquired. The bear left the area immediately when hazed by park staff.

There were four reports of people encountering habituated bears (bears that are very tolerant of humans in close proximity); three in the Exit Glacier area and one on the beach at the Aialik Bay Ranger Station. Two of the encounters at Exit Glacier occurred in Marmot Meadows, along the Harding Icefield Trail. In one encounter, a sub-adult black bear continued down the trail towards a group of 30 people, until it was within three feet of the NPS ranger. In the other encounter, the bear continued foraging on vegetation despite the proximity of 15 people 15 feet away. The final report of an encounter at Exit Glacier occurred on the paved trail where groups of visitors surrounded the bear, cutting off any



Female black bear with cub of the year on the Glacier's Edge Trail.

routes of escape for the bear. On the coast, a habituated bear continued to forage along a beach even though two separate groups of people were present. In all of these encounters, the bears were hesitant to alter their behavior or move away from human use areas when humans were present, but did not behave aggressively.

There were three surprise encounters between people and bears in the Exit Glacier area and one on McMullen Beach. Two of the Exit Glacier encounters involved people walking on a trail not making noise or paying attention to their surroundings. In both of these encounters, the bear “huffed” before moving away. The third surprise encounter occurred during a ranger-led hike on the Harding Icefield Trail in an area with several switchbacks. The bear’s attempts to get away from the people were thwarted by the topography and the number of people. In the surprise encounter at McMullen Beach, the bear left the area as soon as the person made its presence known.

The last two encounters involved curious bears that remained in an area with people present. One encounter involved an NPS employee working in Beauty Bay. The employee was sitting in tall brush in the Nuka River estuary when she was approached by a black bear. After minor hazing, the bear backed away, but remained nearby. The employee then decided to leave the area. The

other encounter involved a guided kayak group in McMullen Cove. The bear reportedly stood its ground and was hesitant to leave the area.

Bear-human encounters are common occurrences in KEFJ. Learning how to respond to such an encounter is important for the safety of both humans and bears. In ten of the eleven encounters, the primary person involved had received bear safety information prior to entering the park. Avoiding a bear encounter is the best way to stay safe in bear country. In 2007, a bear obtained food from unwary visitors in the Exit Glacier picnic area. Keep your food close and be prepared to defend it from a bear if necessary. Keep picnic areas clean of food scraps and wipe off picnic tables. Bears travel through human use areas and often frequent trails. It is important to give bears the space they require so they can continue their activities undisturbed. If you encounter a bear while hiking, move out of the bear’s direction of travel if possible. To minimize surprise encounters, stay alert, be aware of your surroundings, travel in a group, and let bears know where you are by making noise. If you do encounter a bear, do not run, stay calm, and identify yourself as human. If the bear does not leave the area, you should. Before you travel in bear country, review the bear safety information for the area and make safety your responsibility.

Bear-Human Incidents

There were 5 bear-human incidents in KEFJ in 2008 and all occurred in the Exit Glacier area. Four of these bear-human interactions were classified as incidents because a bear damaged property; all of these incidents involved NPS sound monitoring equipment. Three of the incidents occurred in the Exit Glacier area at a remote location north of the park road and one occurred by the Harding Icefield Trail. At both locations, some of the equipment was disturbed including a microphone, anemometer, and a solar panel. Several pieces of equipment were damaged including two foam microphone covers, two tripods and the plastic housing to two microphones. Data collection was interrupted as a result of these incidents. Bears are curious animals that will investigate foreign objects in their environment.

The last bear-human incident involved the use of bear pepper spray to deter an approaching bear. Two park visitors were hiking on the Harding Icefield Trail when they encountered a bear on the trail. The first time they encountered the bear they were not making noise and were in thick brush. The couple yelled and the bear responded by retreating down the trail. The couple readied their bear spray and continued down the trail, making noise as they went. They soon encountered the bear coming up the trail towards them. The bear continued moving in their direction. Instead of moving off the trail so the bear could pass, the couple stood their ground. When the bear approached within approximately 20 feet, they discharged two short blasts of bear pepper spray. When the bear encountered the cloud of spray, it immediately moved off the trail.

There were no reports of bears obtaining human food or garbage this year.

Bear Management

Bears are common throughout Kenai Fjords National Park. The opportunity to see a bear in its natural habitat contributes significantly to enjoyment of the park. This experience, however, can increase the potential for conflict between humans and bears and alter normal bear behavior. All bears are capable of injuring people or damaging property. These factors present a challenge when striving to preserve bears as a component of the ecosystem while providing for public safety.

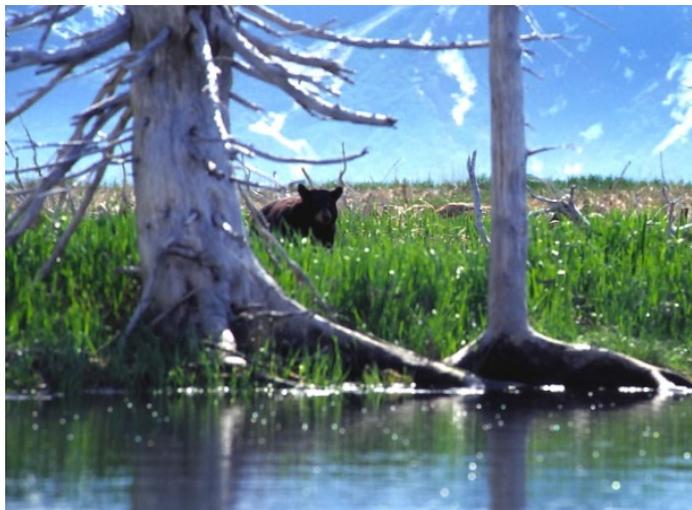
Bear management at KEFJ is an evolving process. In 2007, the Superintendent approved an Interim Bear Management Plan (BMP) to guide bear management in the park. The BMP is proving to be an effective tool for managers and field staff and has significantly clarified the goals and purposes of the program. The goals of the program are to:

- Provide for visitor and staff safety by minimizing bear-human conflicts.
- Minimize the effects of human activities on the distribution, abundance, and behavior of black and brown bear populations.
- Ensure opportunities for visitors to observe, understand, and appreciate black and brown bears, as a part of an intact ecosystem.

The bear management program consists of proactive measures such as food storage and education, and management actions such as hazing and aversive conditioning of bears. All park employees, cooperators, and commercial operators assist in bear management in countless ways: emptying garbage cans, giving bear talks, keeping a clean camp, and filling out Bear-Human Information Management System (BHIMS) forms. BHIMS facilitates the collection, storage, and analysis of detailed information on bear-human interactions, and enables informed bear management and public education efforts.

Primary responsibility for bear management in the park lies with Interpretation & Visitor Services (IVS) and Resource Management (RM) teams. The Bear Incident Response Team consists of trained RM and IVS staff, available to respond to incidents and conduct hazing or aversive conditioning operations. They are the employees you see in the campground and along the trails monitoring bear activity and educating visitors.

Continued communication and training are needed to facilitate increased participation in the program from staff and visitors and to better define the roles and responsibilities of those involved. The BMP is updated annually to incorporate lessons learned and new information on bear ecology, behavior, and management.



A black bear forages in a coastal sedge meadow in Northwestern Fjord.

Training

The KEFJ Bear Management Team recognizes the importance of providing training in bear ecology, behavior and safety for employees, volunteers, researchers, and partners.

The Bear Management Team provided bear training to all field staff in May. These trainings included an overview of the KEFJ bear management program, employee safety, bear behavior, incident response, and crowd control. All field staff also received training in the use of bear pepper spray as a deterrent to aggressive bear behavior.

All Bear Incident Response Team members qualified as shotgun bearers and attended a two day aversive conditioning training at KEFJ with NPS Regional Wildlife Biologist Terry DeBruyn and NPS Regional Special Agent, Scott Taylor. These KEFJ-specific trainings included the proper tools and application of aversive conditioning and practice scenarios which were conducted at the local firing range.

Bear Incident Response Team members presented bear safety briefings to SCA and SAGA crews staying at the Exit Glacier Trail Builders Camp and sea kayak guides.

Management Activities

The Maintenance Team completed construction of the hard-sided cook shelter at the Exit Glacier Trail Builders Camp, and the camp was continuously occupied from June to September. RM staff continued to set-up and maintain the electric fence, and no bear issues were reported for the first time in several years. Two new food storage lockers were placed at camping beaches in Aialik Bay – at the pocket beach north of the Ranger Station and the campsite adjacent to the Holgate PUC.

New education strategies were also implemented this year. Food etiquette signs were placed on the picnic tables at the Exit Glacier campground and picnic area, and bear activity updates were regularly posted by RM staff on the KEFJ website.

Although the number of bear-human interactions in the park was markedly lower in 2008 than in the previous three years, there was increased bear activity around KEFJ during the summer of 2008. Brown bears were regularly observed in and

around Seward. Forty brown bears were killed on the Kenai Peninsula in defense of life or property (DLP), the highest year on record for this State listed *Population of Special Concern*.

The KEFJ Bear Management Team was awarded the 2008 NPS Andrew Clark Hecht Memorial Public Safety Achievement Award. This is the highest award bestowed by the NPS for outstanding public safety achievement and is presented annually by the Director of the NPS. In 1970, a nine-year-old boy, Andrew Clark Hecht, fell into a hot spring in Yellowstone National Park and died. The Andrew Clark Hecht Memorial Public Safety Achievement Award was created in his memory, and is annually given to the individual or group who contributes the most in public safety. This is a great honor for the park and a tribute to all the hard work that has gone into our bear management program. By understanding the types of bear-human interactions that occur in the park, we can improve our understanding of bear behavior and avoid negative interactions in the future.

Black and Brown Bear Activity annual summaries are prepared by the KEFJ Resource Management Team. This report was prepared by Meg Hahr and Caroline Jezierski. We wish to thank all park staff and visitors who contributed wildlife observations, BHIMS reports, and photos this year. Comments or questions? Contact us:

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Picnic table sign created by the KEFJ Interpretation Team.