

# WILDLIFE AWARENESS

Have you ever wondered what you would do if you encountered a bear, cougar, snake or other potentially dangerous wildlife species. Do you have the mental tools to keep you safe from harm? All wild animals are unpredictable and can be dangerous; being responsible and prepared is your best defense against a bear or cougar attack.

## BEARS

The following practices will help you avoid encounters with bears.

- Keep a clean camp - never bury garbage (keep in airtight containers); cook well away from your tent; never leave cooking utensils; coolers grease etc. lying around camp; never keep food items and scented products in or near your tent; cook at least 50 metres away from your sleeping area
- Store food properly (airtight containers kept either in the trunk of your car, or suspended at least four metres above the ground)
- Keep pets leashed - pets can anger a bear and provoke an attack
- Avoid walking at night as animals are more active at night; if you must, carry a flashlight to avoid surprising them
- Always keep children nearby and in sight
- Heed posted warnings
- Hike as a group - travelling in numbers reduces the risk; when hiking near dense shrubbery and along water bodies, make lots of noise to warn wildlife of your approach
- Watch for bear signs - tracks, droppings, recently overturned rocks or logs, rotted wood that has been torn apart, clawed, bitten or rubbed trees
- Never sleep under the stars in bear country; before retiring, walk around your tent to leave a human scent

### If you meet a bear



- Stay calm and keep the animal in view
  - If the bear starts to follow, back away slowly if you can. Never run from a bear unless you know you can reach safety
  - If the bear is standing up on its hind legs, it may be trying to pick up your scent and identify you. Talk softly while continuing to back away. Always keep the animal in view
  - If the bear acts aggressively, try to determine its intent; aggressive behavior includes jaw snapping, head lowering, ear flattening, woofing sounds and growling. A bear may act defensively if it is startled or if it is protecting cubs, its territory, or food. Wave your arms, talk in low tones and back slowly away
  - If a bear appears to be pursuing an attack, always fight back. (this pertains to black bears and young grizzlies) Jump up and down, wave your arms and yell. Try to look as large as possible. NEVER PLAY DEAD - it makes you easier prey! Remember that black bears and grizzlies can climb trees, so stay on the ground
- Mature Grizzly attacks - quickly climb a tree to over four metres if possible, if not, assume the cannonball position on the ground. Lie in a fetal position on your side with your knees against your chest and your head between your knees; this position will show the bear that you are not aggressive and will protect your vital organs in case of an attack

**For more information visit the Bear Aware website.**

## COUGARS

The following tips will help you to avoid encounters with cougars:

- Watch for cougar signs - Stay alert; if you see any of the following signs, leave the area. Tracks, droppings, scratched trees and food caches are all signs of the proximity of a cougar(s). Cougars also urinate/defecate on piles of forest debris to mark their territory
- Carry a walking stick and pepper spray (ensure that you know how to properly use pepper spray)
- Make noise to alert cougars to your presence
- If possible, never travel alone in areas that cougars may inhabit
- At nights keep your pets inside, or in a secured covered kennel; roaming pets are easy prey
- Feed pets indoors; never leave pet food outside
- Make sure that livestock are securely housed at night; livestock feed
- Cougars are attracted to children because of their small size and may confuse them with prey; always keep children in sight and do not let them wander
- If hiking, or riding, don't go out alone; cougars are unlikely to attack a group



### If you see a Cougar

- Never approach a cougar; although they will normally avoid confrontation, they are unpredictable; keep the cougar in view
- Always leave room for a cougar to escape easily
- Immediately pick up your children (children frighten easily and may trigger an attack)
- Don't turn your back on a cougar; face the cougar and slowly back away
- Don't run or play dead; try to back away slowly (running may trigger an attack)

- Stay calm; talk to the cougar in a strong, firm voice
- Make yourself appear as large as possible by holding your arms or an object above your head

### IF YOU ENCOUNTER A COUGAR, AND IT IS OR APPEARS AGGRESSIVE:

- If the cat shows interest or follows you, respond aggressively by maintaining eye contact; make loud noises; arm yourself with rocks or sticks to use as weapons. Try to appear as though you are the predator rather than the prey
- If a cougar does attack - FIGHT BACK! Convince the predator that you are a threat and not prey. Use anything that you can as a weapon - focus your attack on the cougar's face and eyes

### COUGAR FACTS:

- Cougars typically attack from behind and usually aim for the spine or base of the skull
- They are most active at dawn and dusk; however, they will hunt at any time of the day or night and in all seasons
- Children under the age of 16 are the most vulnerable to an attack
- Encounters between humans and cougars are quite rare; a cougar will normally sense you and leave the area before you realize that it is nearby
- The main diet is deer, but they will eat most animals including moose, coyotes, black bear cubs, porcupines and household pets

**For more information, visit the [Safety Guide to Cougars](#)**

## RATTLE SNAKES

Always be aware of your surroundings if walking or riding in areas that rattle snakes are known to inhabit. If you see a snake, stop, locate the snake and allow it to move away; you don't want to trip on a rock or a second snake when trying to avoid an accidental encounter.



The following tips may protect you in case of an accidental encounter:

- Wear long loose pants that cover your legs and hiking boots that cover your ankles
- Always be aware of where you put your hands and feet. Do not reach into piles of rocks, under logs, or into shrubs where snakes may be resting
- Walk/ride with a partner - This is a good practice when frequenting any wilderness area

**For more information on Rattle Snakes, visit the BC Reptiles website**

## YELLOW JACKET WASPS - GROUND NESTS

Underground wasp nests can be very dangerous and are easily disturbed by recreational activities or simply walking too closely. This type of nest is very dangerous and should be avoided as much as possible. Provoked yellow jackets (wasps) are very aggressive and will swarm their prey causing serious harm.



*Photo courtesy Cynthia Rudzis*

Ground nests have a hole at the soil surface through which wasps enter and exit. For large nests this hole can be 2 inches (5cm) in diameter. If you see wasps loitering around a hole in the ground, this is a pretty good indication that a nest lies below. The nests are often stepped on (if back country riding, the hole can be easily missed by a horse and rider) causing the wasps to become angered which may result in swarming behavior and wasp attack.

### TIPS:

- Nests can be found on both front and back country trails; most usually they are just off the side of the trail near a stump or log
- If a nest is spotted, first and foremost, the riders should continue moving forward well out of the nest zone and then halt; riders should stay back out of the danger area to avoid angering the wasps
- It is usually the third or fourth horse that will get attacked; this will be characterized by head shaking, snorting, dancing and possibly bucking
- If attacked, the rider should shout "HORNETS" rather than WASPS as yelling wasps sounds too much like "What" and other riders may get confused as to what the problem is
- The rider(s) being attacked should also encourage their horses to move forward out of the nest area and dismount when it is safe or possible to do so

### MARKING THE NEST:

If it is possible for the location of the nest to be marked then one person, alone on foot, should approach the nest with a can of spray (specifically designed to shoot a jet stream from a distance) and disarm the nest. At least one can of spray should be carried by someone in the group. Spraying the nest will prevent another attack if the group comes back the same way, another group from being attacked, and the trail from being re-routed to avoid the nest. At times there may be no option if the trail is across a steep hillside or in a narrow gap.

## CONSERVATION OFFICER CONTACTS

**For all other enquiries, contact a conservation officer in your region**