



Bear and Cougar Encounters

Hiking Washington State trails is a great way to enjoy wildflowers, wildlife and the beautiful views our state has to offer. There are some wildlife viewing ethics, especially when it comes to encountering animals with a reputation for being occasionally hostile. In our neck of the woods, these animals include the black bear and the cougar. Below are some tips on what you should do if you encounter a black bear or a cougar while enjoying the outdoors.

Black Bears

Bears tend to avoid humans. However, human-habituated bears are bears that, because of prolonged exposure to people, have lost their natural fear or wariness around people. Do everything you can to avoid an encounter with any bear. Prevention is the best advice. Don't hike alone and always make your presence known – simply talking will do the trick. Carry pepper spray when recreating in areas of known bear sightings, it can be an effective deterrent to an aggressive bear if it is sprayed directly into the bear's face within 6 to 10 feet. Locally, you can get pepper spray at Big 5 Sporting Goods.

Tips if you are face-to-face with a black bear:

- Stop, remain calm and assess the situation. If the bear seems unaware of you, move away quietly when it's not looking in your direction. Continue to observe the animal as you retreat. Watch for behavior changes.
- If a bear walks toward you, identify yourself as a human by standing up, waving your hands above your head, and talking to the bear in a low voice. (Don't use the word bear because a human-food-conditioned bear might associate "bear" with food ... people feeding bears often say "here bear.")
- Don't throw anything at the bear and avoid direct eye contact, which the bear could interpret as a threat.
- If you cannot safely move away from the bear or the bear continues toward you, scare it away by clapping your hands, stomping your feet, yelling, and staring the animal in the eyes. If you are in a group, stand shoulder-to shoulder and raise and wave your arms to appear intimidating. The more it persists the more aggressive your response should be. If you have pepper spray, use it.
- Don't run from the bear unless safety is very near and you are absolutely certain you can reach it (knowing that bears can run 35 mph). Climbing a tree is generally not recommended as an escape from an aggressive black bear, as black bears are adept climbers and may follow you up a tree.

Cougars

Cougars are solitary and secretive animals rarely seen in the wild. They average 140 pounds, 6-8 feet long from nose to tip of tail and stand 30 inches tall at the shoulder. Adult cougars vary in color from reddish-brown to gray, with a black tip on their long tail. They roam widely, covering a home range of 50 to 150 square miles.

The best way to avoid a cougar encounter is to hike in small groups and make enough noise to avoid surprising a cougar. Do not approach dead animals, especially deer or elk; they could be cougar prey left for a later meal.

Tips if you are face-to-face with a cougar:

- Stop, stand tall and don't run. Pick up small children. Don't run. A cougar's instinct is to chase.
- Do not approach the animal, especially if it is near a kill or with kittens.
- Try to appear larger than the cougar. Never take your eyes off the animal or turn your back. Do not crouch down or try to hide.
- If the animal displays aggressive behavior, shout, wave your arms and throw rocks. The idea is to convince the cougar that you are not prey, but a potential danger.
- If the cougar attacks, fight back aggressively and try to stay on your feet. Cougars have been driven away by people who have fought back.

What to do after an encounter

The Department of Fish and Wildlife responds to cougar and bear sightings when there is a threat to public safety or property. If it is an emergency, dial 911. If you experience a cougar or black bear problem, and it is not an emergency, contact our regional Department of Fish and Wildlife office during business hours at 360-249-1229. If you need to report a non-emergency problem when the DFW offices are closed, contact the Washington State Patrol at 253-538-3240 or Pierce County Sheriff's Department at 253-798-4721.