

Do Bears That Lose Their Fear of People Become More Likely to Attack?

No. They become less likely. Summarized below are behaviors of wild bears accustomed to people. All were free-roaming. All had uncontrolled access to the public. No attacks.

Black Bears

1. In **Eagles Nest Township, MN**, residents have hand-fed bears for over 50 years. Bears learned to trust people at the feeding sites. The result? The area is noted for its few bear problems—even in years of scarce natural food.

2. At **Vince Shute Wildlife Sanctuary near Orr, MN**, people have hand-fed hundreds of black bears for decades. The bears become unafraid of people at the feeding site. Until the mid-1990's, the public was free to mingle with the bears without rules or supervision. People teased bears with food. Toddlers steadied themselves against 500-pound bears. People lifted children up to bears' mouths. Foolish? Probably. Attacks? None. And the surrounding area where these bears roam is noted for having few bear problems.

3. **Around Ely, MN**, researchers have worked closely with wild black bears since 1969. Over a hundred volunteers have spent 1,000's of hours walking with them (including mothers with cubs) (Rogers and Wilker 1990). Workers frequently pulled hair samples, adjusted radio-collars, or took heart rates in exchange for food rewards. The more accustomed the bears became to the workers, the more they ignored them. None of these bears have gone after someone and hurt him or her.

4. **Near Grand Marais, MN**, Jack Becklund (1999) hand-fed 10 bears that lost their fear of him at his rural residence during 1990-1995. Attacks? None.

5. In **Michigan**, Dr. Terry DeBruyn (1999) did his 4-year Ph.D. study walking with black bears, including mothers with cubs. Attacks? None.

6. In **Pennsylvania**, Dr. Gary Alt spent 10 years studying 21 bears that lived among 7,000 people, many of which hand-fed them. The bear density in that community (3 per square mile) was higher than in any national park or national forest. Attacks? None.

7. In **Smoky Mountains National Park**, Dr. Jane Tate (1983) watched tourists hand-feed bears along roadsides. Raucous tourists crowded around bears, poured beer over their heads, lured them into cars, placed children on their backs, and had bears lick honey from children's faces. The bears were "amazingly tolerant and restrained." When tourists tried to pet bears that were not yet accustomed to it, some defensively nipped or cuffed, causing minor injuries, but none attacked.

8. **Across North America**, wild black bears killed 60 people between 1900 and 2007. Attacks were fewest where bears were accustomed to people. Only 5% of the

killings were in heavily populated eastern states where thousands of bears had become habituated to people. 95% of the killings were in sparsely populated western states or remote areas of Canada and Alaska where bears and people have little contact.

9. **At garbage dumps across America**, people have mingled with black bears for over a century, hand-feeding them and dumping their garbage with bears standing next to them. In 1989, a researcher asked hundreds of bear biologists at an International Bear Conference if anyone knew of an attack at a garbage dump. No one did.

Grizzly Bears

10. **At McNeil River Sanctuary in Alaska**, people and grizzly bears observe each other with no fences between them. Huge bears fight, mate, and nurse cubs, ignoring people sitting within a few feet of them. In over 60,000 encounters, no one has been hurt (Herrero et al. 2005).

11. In **Alaska**, Dr. Stephen Stringham leads groups to watch grizzly bears that are accustomed to people. Based on over 10,000 close encounters, he wrote, "There is little risk of being mauled by fully acclimated bruins" (Stringham 2009).

12. In **Yellowstone National Park**, grizzly bears forage near hordes of tourists that are watching from roads. Dr. Stephen Herrero (2005) wrote that these habituated bears have not injured any bear-viewers and "are less likely to attack hikers or bear viewers on a per-encounter basis."

References

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