

# On the Matter of Polar Bears

**By Finley Perry in collaboration with Steve Loutrel,  
who has sailed to and climbed in the Torngat region,  
and Angus Simpson of Torngat Mountains National Park  
January 2009**

The subject of bear viewing and personal protection is a complex one. To begin with, the wilderness is not a zoo. Animal sightings are not predictable and can occur unexpectedly. Bears are numerous north of Nain, and one will see them - both polar bear and black bear. It makes sense to prepare for an encounter.

If not "endangered", polar bears have at best a challenging existence. They are adapted to the far north of frozen seas, hunting seals on the sea ice for much of the year and living on whatever can be scrounged ashore in the warmer months. They live where food is scarce. Anything that looks like a meal is worth investigating. For whatever reason, polar bear populations on the Labrador and Baffin coasts are reported to be increasing in recent years. It could be that the populations are growing, or, perversely, it might be that changes in the extent of sea ice, or other environmental factors, have stranded concentrated static or even shrinking populations in certain areas, making these populations appear to be increasing.

Polar bears are meat eaters. Their primary diet is seals taken on the sea ice. They are opportunistic predators. In summer they will scavenge as evidenced by berries in their scat, and it is safe to assume that along the Labrador coast in the summer and fall before freeze-up, they are generally always hungry. They will attack when an opportunity appears favorable. For example, "opportunity" might exist if potential prey appears weaker or slower than the hunter or separated from a protective group. A single scared tourist hiking across the landscape might constitute such opportunity. A pack or group of "prey" keeping close together would appear more troublesome.

Black bears on the other hand are omnivorous and in fact most of their diet is vegetation. It varies, but 20 or 30% of their diet may be meat. Black bears may not be as predatory as polar bears, but they make up for it in unpredictability. Keep in mind, as you look around at the north Labrador landscape, that there is not a lot to eat in this place.

The native Inuit will not go into the country without a rifle. At the Parks Canada Saglek base camp, those venturing out of camp for research or recreation are accompanied by an armed "Bear Monitor". On the other hand, in Canadian national parks, no visitors may carry firearms. In the Reserve a special agreement allows the carrying or use of firearms only by native Inuit.

Considering that the carrying or use of firearms inside Torngat Mountains National Park is illegal, and use outside the park requires, at best, a cumbersome permitting procedure, and, if used less than expertly, a gun could well make an otherwise innocuous bear encounter truly dangerous...then what other protective measures can be employed?

- When going ashore, go in groups and keep close together. Keep a very close watch for bears, always scan the surroundings, be aware of where you are most likely to find a bear. You don't want to surprise a bear or be surprised by a bear.
- Before going ashore, scan the landscape carefully for signs of animals. If you see a bear, chances are he has seen you and curiosity will bring him to the shore giving both parties a good look at each other. Do not go ashore where you see bears. Either move to another harbor or simply stay on board.

- If using an inflatable dinghy, consider taking along a second inexpensive inflatable "raft" to enable a safe return to your vessel in the event a curious bear "playfully" punctures your primary transportation while you are away walking. See Steve Loutrel's notes below.
- Don't leave trash and garbage ashore. Avoid things that will attract bears when ashore -- for example, cleaning fish or game. Avoid cooking if possible.
- Look for signs of animal presence - tracks, scat, fresh kill.
- If you find a fresh kill, stay away from it. Don't get between a bear and its food.
- Try not to surprise any wildlife. Make noise. Use care when approaching blind corners.
- In the same vein, be aware of wind direction. If you spot an animal, and he sees you, try to stay upwind of him to give him notice of your presence and a scent of what you are.
- Carry noise-makers, "bear bangers" - perhaps a flare pistol - to frighten off an animal that comes too close. Again, see Steve Loutrel's notes below.
- If you encounter a bear, keep your movements slow (relatively) and deliberate. Do not run.
- Don't get between a mother and cubs. A mother with her cub is especially dangerous. If she sees you as a risk to her cub you are in an extremely dangerous situation.
- Do not encourage an attack by making eye contact. Move off slowly. Speak assertively.
- Pay constant attention to your surroundings. If a bear appears interested and / or approaches you, try to scare him away as early as possible. You do not want to observe him up close!!!!

Those who make camp ashore will sooner or later have a bear encounter in camp. For this reason, Parks Canada discourages kayaking along the coast without a mother ship for sleeping. Camping on the beaches is dangerous. The issue is not "you might have a bear encounter, but you will have a bear encounter". Those who cruise the coast in a yacht will find bears along the shore or swimming off a beach, but it would be most unusual to hear of one coming aboard or attempting to board (see point on opportunity above). If your plans include extensive activity ashore, consider enlisting the services of a native guide / bear monitor. There is much to be learned of the country, customs, and wildlife from these individuals in addition to the peace of mind they provide.

Further excellent information on preparing for a bear encounter is available from the website for Auyuittuk National Park in Baffin:

<https://www.pc.gc.ca/en/pn-np/nu/ayuittuq/securite-safety/ours-bears>

## **Information on handling bears** Contributed by Steve Loutrel - January, '09

- A. Tactics for scaring bears away. (This is covered in the DVD) If a bear seems to be interested in you, you should scare him away when he is as far away as possible - don't wait for him to get close. The more comfortable he gets with you and the more time he is in contact, the more chance he has to become predatory. If he becomes predatory, he will attack with the intention of having you for dinner. The advice from the park information is that if you are attacked "fight back". Without a firearm, this is a daunting situation! Start by throwing large stones. As climbers, we carried our ice axes - even if we didn't need them for the climb. I believe a group of people, all armed with ice axes against one bear does have a chance - do not consider it hopeless and give up! There is a (reasonable?) chance that a predatory bear, feeling the results of well-aimed blows with an ice axe may decide it is not worth it and depart. Clearly, the goal is to avoid encounters and to never let the situation get to this point!

- B. Equipment you should have ahead of time.
- a. Pen-launched bear bangers
  - b. Pen-launched screamers - launch a projectile which emits a loud screaming whistle.
  - c. Flare gun?? I have not seen it recommended but it may be helpful, and you have it on board anyway.
  - d. Loud horn.
  - e. Bear repellent - pepper spray. This must be declared at customs. They should let you through though there have been problems with them not allowing the spray through. It is important to note that you are going to a wilderness area and that the pepper spray is for repelling bears. The container must say that it is a bear repellent. Pepper spray for protection against people is illegal. We are told by the park personnel that it is not clear whether pepper spray is effective against polar bears. There are documented cases where spray was deployed effectively, BUT IT MUST BE STRESSED THAT BEAR SPRAY IS A VERY LAST RESORT AFTER ALL ELSE HAS FAILED. BEAR SPRAY IN AN OF ITSELF SHOULD NOT BE CONSIDERED ADEQUATE PROTECTION AGAINST POLAR BEARS.
  - f. Consider carrying a legal weapon - heavy walking stick, ice axe, axe, etc. Realize that it may not be effective.

## **Bear Behavior**

- a. Bears seem to find inflatable dinghies interesting - perhaps they remind them of seals. Several yachts have had inflatables which were tied astern destroyed by polar bears.
- b. I have heard of observations of bears swimming at speeds of approximately 5 knots for significant distances. This means they can easily overtake a rowed inflatable. You would be very vulnerable while rowing in an inflatable.
- c. When we leave the inflatable on the beach for any time, we deflate it, roll it up, and if we are going to be gone long, bury it under a pile of rocks. A second method of getting back to the boat is a good idea. Perhaps a dry suit? Check carefully for bears before setting out for the boat in a dry suit!!

## **Firearms**

For information on bringing a firearm into Canada – Visit <https://www.ezbordercrossing.com/the-inspection-experience/transporting-firearms/bringing-a-firearm-into-canada/> Keep in mind that laws and regulations are enforced as best understood by those charged with that responsibility.

What firearm to carry if you decide to carry one and can deal with the permits? -- The authorities recommend a pump action shot gun - with no choke. It can be handled quickly for close-in shooting - which is likely to be the case. If you only have one shotgun, it is recommended that you load the magazine with slugs, keep the chamber empty and learn how to top load the gun with deterrents such as bangers, screamers, plastic slugs and beanbags. Do not mix the ammunition in the magazine. If you have to shoot a charging bear you want every shot to count. Ideally you could have 2 shotguns. 1 with slugs and 1 with deterrents. Buckshot can be problematic and is not recommended. If you prefer a rifle, it should be a big-game caliber.

- a. 375 H&H Magnum would be my preference.
- b. 338 Winchester Magnum is not a bad choice.

- c. Some people use a 30-06 though it is pretty light for stopping an angry polar bear at short range.
- d. The Inuit frequently carry a 243 Winchester, but this is very light unless you are an expert Inuit hunter. The shot must be extremely well placed to do anything other than make the bear very mad.
- e. It is important to use hunting ammunition with very controlled expansion so that it will give deep penetration. You want a "big game" cartridge.
- f. The big game calibers generally only carry 3 rounds in the magazine. You should keep the chamber clear unless you are about to shoot so you will only have 3 shots before you reload. If you fire a warning shot, you will only have 2 left.
- g. Sights should be useable for short range shooting.

You should be very experienced with the firearm. If you do need to use it, there won't be much time to figure it out! If you do have a firearm with you (outside the National Park), you should use it only as the last resort. The bear protection permit requires you to carry other non-lethal methods for scaring bears away. You must do everything you can to avoid confrontations with polar bears. This includes studying and understanding bear behavior as much as possible. Again, if you are forced to kill a polar bear, you should consider it a personal defeat - you did not do your job in avoiding a confrontation or scaring the bear away. Further, if there is strong evidence that the actions were unnecessary and irresponsible, then charges may be laid.

You are the guest in this country. It will pay to find your place in harmony with the land and animals you encounter.