

Carrie Ashie

# Hunting in Grizzly Country

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## GRIZZLY BEAR POPULATIONS ACROSS MONTANA

(Figure 1) are rapidly growing and expanding into historic ranges (Figures 2 and 3). For hunters, this expansion increases the likelihood of human-bear conflict. While there are many well-documented safety practices for recreating in grizzly country, they often place emphasis on being visible and making as much noise as possible, which generally is not the best approach for a hunter. At least not a successful one.

As hunters, we inherently put ourselves at greater risk of a dangerous bear encounter. For example, we are active in low light conditions, try to remain hidden, move quietly, sound and smell as much like game as possible, and are in the field when the bears are most active and calorie loading for the winter (hyperphagia).

## So, what can hunters do to prepare and be more bear aware during the hunting season?

### 1. CARRY BEAR SPRAY

First and foremost, regardless of the activity, when in bear country, the singular most important thing to do is to carry bear spray, make sure it's within reach and that you're familiar with how to use it. Research has shown bear spray to be a proven and valuable deterrent against bears (Smith et al. 2008, Smith et al. 2020, Wilder et al. 2022).

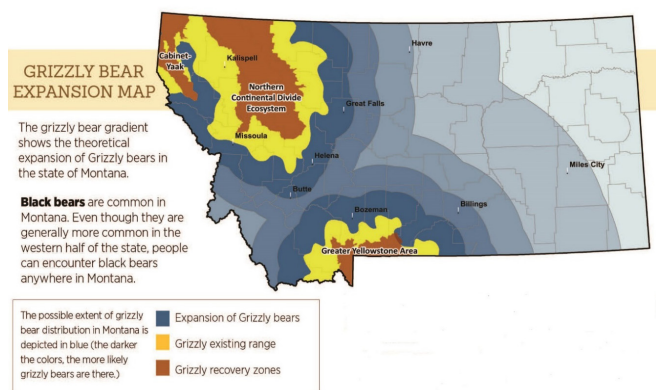
Make sure to purchase bear spray instead of "pepper spray." Labels should say bear "deterrent" and "Not for Use on Humans" and should always have an EPA registration number and expiration date (Figure 4). Check the label closely to be certain it has not expired. The expiration date is related to the propellant. Please report to local wildlife officials any time you must use bear spray on an animal.

It must be said, bear spray IS NOT a repellent. Do not use it preventatively, like bug spray on a person or outdoor gear.

Pro Tip: In case you have to use pepper spray and it gets on you or someone else, carry a small amount of baby shampoo; it works well for breaking down the oils so it is easily removed from the skin, and it's gentle on the eyes.

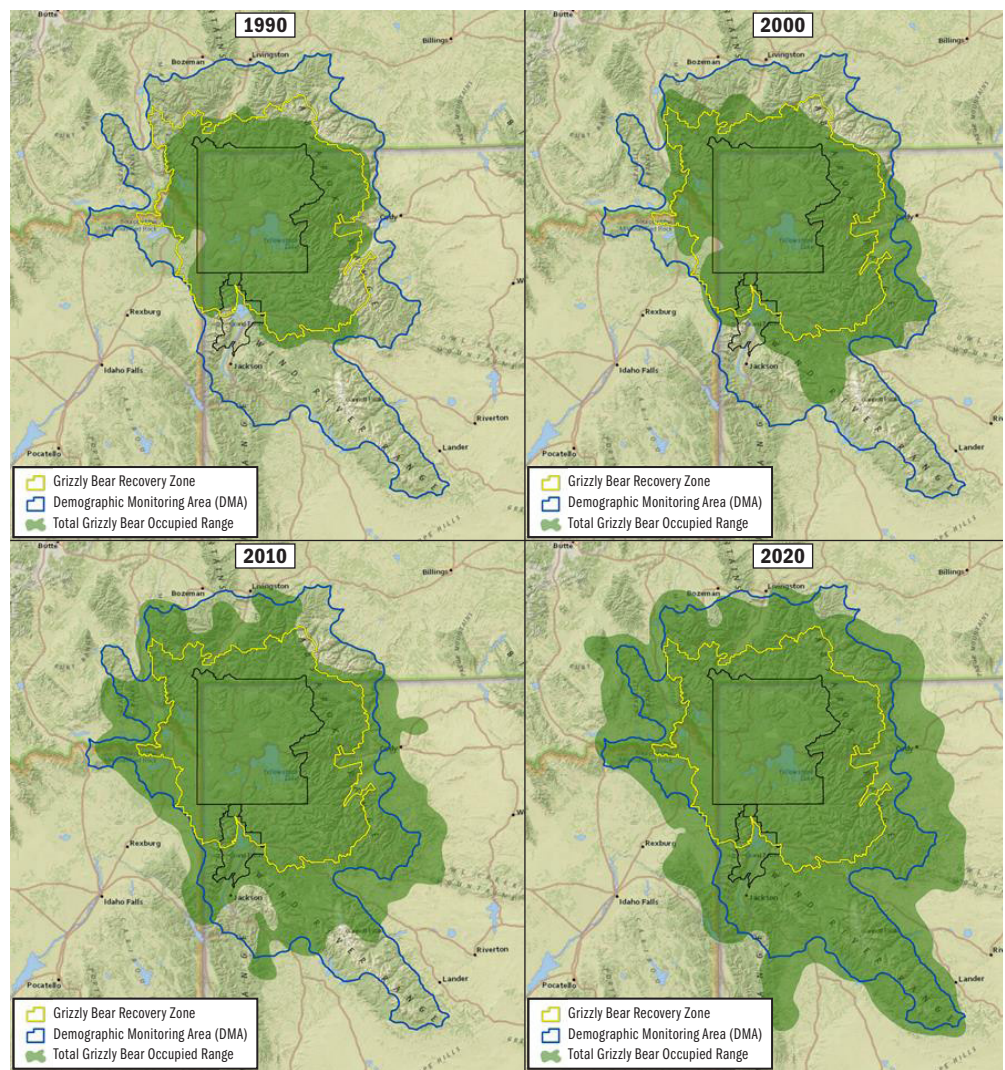


**Figure 1.** Classic illustration of a grizzly bear including several key features for identification: shoulder hump, small rounded ears, and dished face profile. Photo: Jean Beaufort



**Figure 2.** Grizzly bear expansion map illustrating known and theoretical distributions of grizzly bears in the state of Montana (USDA Forest Service).

**Figure 3.** Grizzly bear occupied range (green shaded area) in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, based on 10-year data windows ending in 1990, 2000, 2010, 2020 (Bjornlie and Haroldson 2019).



## 2. AVOID HUNTING SOLO

The next best thing to do during hunting season is hunt with others. Research shows that traveling in groups can reduce the likelihood of a dangerous bear encounter. However, for many this isn't an option. If you must hunt alone in bear country, let someone know your plans and have a way to check in and send an emergency signal (e.g., carrying a GPS unit with capacity to send communications or emergency signal via satellite).

## 3. BE ALERT AND SPATIALLY AWARE WHEN IN BEAR COUNTRY

Spend more time looking for fresh bear sign (e.g., tracks, scat, overturned rocks, tree markings, and concentrations of preferred bear foods; see the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee (IGBC) Bear Identification and Signs website: [igbconline.org/be-bear-aware/bear-id/](http://igbconline.org/be-bear-aware/bear-id/)). If you notice signs of bear activity or presence of a carcass or scavenging birds, use extreme caution and try to avoid the area. When possible,

avoid pushing straight through areas without a clear line of sight, especially those that are thick and shady, or streams and rivers where visibility is poor and/or moving water makes it difficult for bears to hear a person approaching.

## 4. KEEP A CLEAN CAMPSITE

Properly store food in bear-proof containers or hard-sided vehicles. If that is not possible then hang food 100 yards away from camp at least 10 feet high and 4 feet away from a vertical structure (Figure 5). Cook food and strain and toss water at least 100 yards from the downwind side of the tent. Do not bring anything into the tent that has a scent and do not sleep in clothes you cooked in. In bear country, open spots with long, clear lines of sight are best for setting up camp. If the camp is more accessible, a portable electric fence surrounding camp is also a good option.

Note: some public lands have required food storage guidelines (see Figure 6 as an example). It is up to you to know the requirements for the area you are hunting.





**Figure 4.** Illustration of bear spray label components. Label includes the words bear “deterrent” and “Not for Use on Humans” as well as an EPA registration number and expiration date. *Note: this information is for educational purposes only. Reference to commercial products or trade names does not imply discrimination or endorsement by MSU Extension.*



**Figure 5.** Illustration of best practices for food storage around a camp site. (Bear Wise Wyoming, Wyoming Game and Fish Department).

## 5. COMMUNICATE WITH OTHER HUNTERS

Often in the field, we may come across fellow hunters or have friends who hunt in the general area. In these cases, sharing detailed information on when and where grizzly bears have been seen and/or fresh sign has been observed can be invaluable and may very well save someone’s life.

## 6. MAKE SOME SACRIFICES TO MAXIMIZE SAFETY

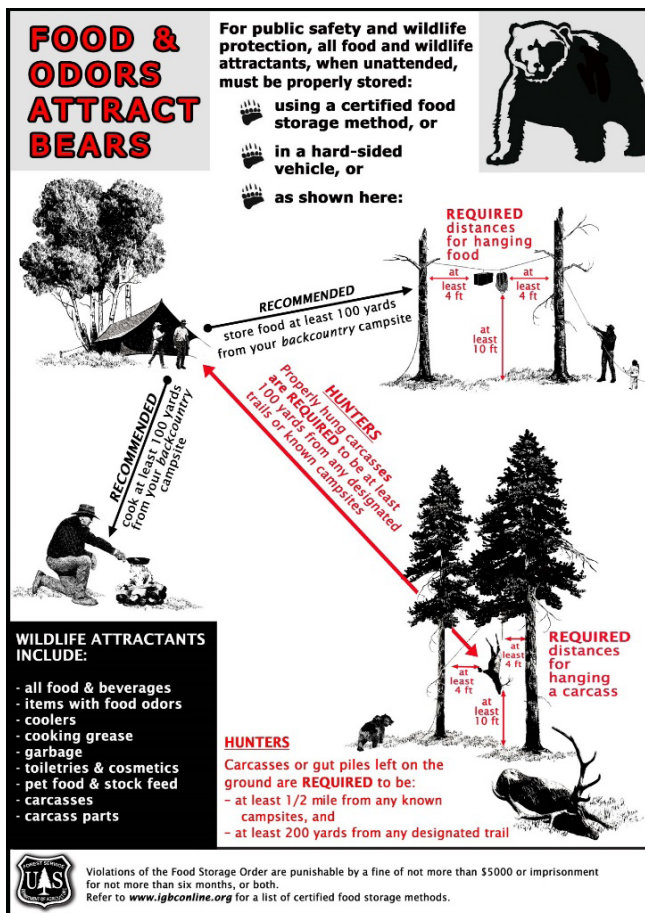
Many hunters know the last hour of daylight as that magical ‘golden hour.’ However, coming back to camp after dark or tracking an animal shot at last light is difficult enough without having to worry about bears. Butchering and packing an animal at night is a bad combination and adds an element of

danger. When hunting in bear country, calling a hunt with a few minutes of daylight left to avoid having to locate and process an animal well into the night may not be ideal; on the other hand, a little extra caution allows for an enjoyable and safe hunt.

## 7. WHEN HANDLING AND RETRIEVING HARVESTED GAME

There are few things more attractive to grizzly bears than an animal carcass and the longer an animal is in the field the more likely it is to be discovered by a bear. When you successfully harvest an animal, the most important thing to do is to process, pack and remove the game meat out of the field as quickly as one can safely move it while avoiding careless accidents while processing the animal (e.g., cutting oneself). During this process there are a few key steps one can (and should) take to minimize conflicts over a carcass.

- It is best to avoid processing an animal carcass at night. See tip #6.
- If you have to process an animal carcass in the dark, be prepared: have strong headlamps with extra batteries and have look outs when possible. If you are solo, take time to stop periodically and scan the area, pay particular attention to the downwind side.
- Separate the carcass from the gut pile as quickly as possible with as much distance as possible (> 100 yards). Using a tarp can make it easier to remove the gut pile from the processing site.
- Any meat that cannot be packed out immediately should be hung in a tree at least 10' to 15' from the ground and 4' from the tree trunk (**Figure 5**).
- If you must leave part of the carcass on the ground, place it in plain view so when you return, you can see if a bear is present or if it has been disturbed prior to approaching. Placing something conspicuous (e.g., tree limbs, article of clothing, or something similar and highly visible) on the carcass can aid in detecting if the carcass has been disturbed upon approach.
- When returning to a carcass, use extreme caution. Stop and view the carcass from a distance with binoculars. Approach the carcass upwind and make noise to alert a bear of your presence.
- If you do not detect any disturbance, approach the site slowly while making noise in case there are any bears in the area that have been undetected.
- If you detect disturbance, a bear has probably been to the carcass or may be bedded nearby. In this situation,



**Figure 6.** Illustration of food storage requirements for camping in Custer Gallatin National Forest (USDA Forest Service).

DO NOT approach the carcass site. Instead report the incident to the local wildlife agency. In some instances, you might be eligible for a replacement license.

- NEVER attempt to scare a bear off a carcass it has claimed.

Unfortunately, regardless of safety precautions, encounters do occur. If you encounter a bear, stop and assess the situation. The bear's behavior – not the species – should first determine how you respond (i.e., is the bear aware of you or not? Is it threatening, curious, or fleeing?). Never run from a bear. If physically attacked by a surprised/agitated grizzly, use bear

spray. When all else fails, lie face down, covering your neck and head with your hands and arms and remain still until the bear is gone. If you have a backpack, leave it on to protect your back. Use a weapon only as a last resort. Attacks often happen quickly and in close range and wounded bears may intensify and prolong an attack. If you have to kill a grizzly bear in self-defense, report the incident to local law enforcement officials immediately.

Note: color alone is not a good indicator for identifying bear species. For more on identifying differences between grizzly bears and black bears: [fwp.mt.gov/hunt/education/bear-identification](http://fwp.mt.gov/hunt/education/bear-identification).

At the end of the day, if paranoia rules decisions, hunting in grizzly country is going to be a miserable experience. By staying alert, and exercising caution and a lot of common sense, hunting in grizzly country can be a rewarding and exhilarating hunting adventure.

## References

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