

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS

# Bear Identification Course



*Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks*

# Welcome

Montana's grizzly bear populations continue to expand. Rising numbers of grizzly bears mean higher concentrations in traditional habitats and a wider distribution of these animals across both old and new territories. At the same time, Montana maintains huntable populations of black bear.

More grizzly bears in more places mean that you're more likely than ever to have an encounter—especially in the western half of Montana—if you spend any time outdoors.

The same areas that provide habitat for the grizzly bear also provide habitat for the black bear. With the exception of a few island mountain ranges in the eastern half of the state, black bears and grizzly bears overlap in much of Montana. In other words, if you encounter a bear it could be a grizzly bear or a black bear.

Correct identification is critical because unlike black bears, grizzly bears are



*Grizzly bear*



protected by both state and federal law; there is no hunting season for them and they remain listed by the U.S. Wildlife Service as a threatened species. Intentionally or accidentally "taking" a grizzly bear is illegal.



*Black bear*

## Bear distribution in Montana by county



-  *Black bear and grizzly bear*
-  *Black bear only*

# Not all grizzlies are “grizzled” and not all black bears are black!

Despite the names grizzly and black, coat color is the least reliable characteristic for identifying bears. For instance, grizzlies may be pale—almost luminous—blond, or reddish blond, light brown, darker brown, or even almost black. To add to the confusion, the common name grizzly is derived from the term “grizzled,” which refers to white-tipped hair. Grizzled hair occurs mainly on the back and shoulders; thus, from a distance, a grizzly bear appears to have darker legs

and lighter upper parts. Incidentally, it is to this “grizzled” or frosted appearance of the coat that the great bear owes its nickname of “silvertip.” But not all grizzly bears have grizzled hair or are deserving of their nickname. And to complicate matters just a bit more, black bears, despite their name, are not always black. They can also be brown, cinnamon, blond, or a combination of light and dark hair.



A “silvertip”



A “non-black” black bear

# Just like hair color, body size is unreliable for identification!

Just like color, body size is also not a reliable indicator for identifying bears. Most people tend to overestimate the weight and size of bears. A typical adult female grizzly weighs 200-350 pounds and adult males weigh 300-650 pounds. An adult black bear, which can easily weigh 200-300 pounds, may not only weigh the same as a female grizzly but also be about the same height (3-3½ feet at the shoulder). Then too, an adult male black bear will be much heavier and taller than a young grizzly. And just in case it isn't difficult enough yet, try to imagine yourself distinguishing a juvenile dark-haired grizzly from an adult cinnamon-colored black bear in the dim light of an early morning or the long dusky shadows of an early fall evening. Even under the best of conditions you'll find it's nearly impossible to judge the size and weight of a bear in the wild.



*Large black bear*

Other characteristics such diet, behavior, and habitat use are even less reliable because black bears and grizzly eat similar food, display similar behaviors, and occupy much of the same areas in Montana.

## Shoulder Hump

Next, we'll point out those physical characteristics which will enable you to tell the difference between a grizzly bear and a black bear. These are the presence of a shoulder hump, the shape of the facial profile, the size and shape of the ears, and the length of the front claws.

Grizzly bears have well-developed shoulder

muscles for digging and turning over rocks. These muscles appear as a prominent shoulder hump between the front shoulders, which is visible in profile. Black bears have no shoulder hump. A black bear's highest point, when it's on all fours, is the middle of the back or the rear, depending on how the bear is standing.



*Grizzly bear - shoulder hump*



*Black bear - no shoulder hump*

# Facial Profile

A grizzly typically has a concave or dish-shaped profile that extends from between its eyes to the end of its nose. A black bear normally has a long, fairly straight profile

from forehead to nose tip. The dished-face profile of the grizzly makes the face appear broader (when seen full front) than that of the black bear; the face and forehead of the black bear appears more round.



*Grizzly bear  
Dish-shaped facial profile*



*Black bear  
Straight facial profile*

# Ear shape

Grizzly bears have smaller, more rounded ears, whereas the ears of a black bear appear larger, longer, more erect, and pointed.



*Grizzly bear  
Small and rounded ears*



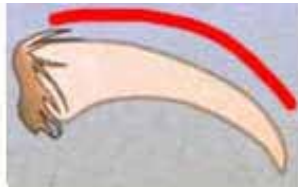
*Black bear  
Large and pointed ears*

# Front claws

Long claws on the front feet are also a good way to tell a grizzly from a black bear. For obvious reasons, this method has its limitations! Grizzly bears have gently curved, often light-colored, two- to four-inch long claws adapted for digging roots and excavating a winter den. The claws

of an adult grizzly can be longer than a person's finger. Black bears have shorter, more sharply curved, dark claws that are often less than two inches long. These claws are well adapted for climbing trees and tearing into rotten logs in search of insects.

*Grizzly bear  
Gently curved,  
2-4 inches long,  
light-colored  
claws*



*Black bear  
Sharply curved,  
less than 2 inches  
long, dark-colored  
claws*



# Tracks

Compared to a black bear's tracks, grizzly tracks of the front feet are more square. If you take a straight edge and hold it across the track of a grizzly front foot, just in front of the pad and behind the toe on either side,

it will not cross the toe on the other side of the foot. A black bear front track is more rounded and a straight edge will cross the toe on the other side of the foot.

*Grizzly bear*



*Black bear*



# Look for that shoulder hump!

“Look for a hump,” says Mike Madel, bear biologist with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. “If you see a hump in profile, it’s a grizzly bear.” Next, look at the face. A dish-faced suggests it’s a grizzly bear, although a dish-faced is sometimes a difficult thing to pick out especially if the animal is moving or digging. If you have a chance to look at the track, long front claws will tell you it’s a grizzly bear. “Never use hair color and body size as methods for identifying bears. The most important thing to remember is the hump!” Madel emphasizes.

Most importantly: Take your time to correctly identify the species before pulling the trigger and when in doubt don’t shoot, especially if the

light is poor, the vegetation dense, or when you’ve only caught a glimpse of a moving animal. It’s the right and only thing to do!



*Grizzly bear*



*When in doubt, don't shoot!*

# DON'T SHOOT, unless you are absolutely sure it's not a grizzly bear or a black bear with young!

Telling the two species apart is important for you the hunter, the future of hunting, and the threatened grizzly bear. If you choose to hunt black bear in the western half of Montana, you need to be able to distinguish between a black bear and a grizzly bear. Killing a grizzly bear in the Lower 48 States is both a federal and state offense that can bring criminal and civil penalties of up to \$50,000 and a year in jail.

Also, remember it's illegal in Montana to kill a female black bear accompanied by young. As with all other aspects of hunting, it's the responsibility of the hunter to be sure of the

species before pulling the trigger; claims of self-defense are exhaustively investigated. Remember, a mistaken identification may impact not only the conservation status of bears, but may also result in more restrictive hunting regulations. Your ability to tell the species apart and to make sure that a black bear doesn't have young will directly influence the future of bear hunting and the public image of hunting in Montana. The decision to act responsibly is up to you! The consequences of failing to do so, however, will affect others as well.



*Grizzly bear*



*Black bear with cubs*