



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Traveling Safely Along the Northeast Alaska Coast:

Sharing the Land with Polar Bears while visiting Arctic National Wildlife Refuge

Polar bear viewing can be a dangerous activity. It is safest to view bears where bear viewing is an expected and managed practice, such as guided excursions from Kaktovik on Barter Island. For information about best practices for polar bear viewing near Barter Island, Alaska, see <http://go.usa.gov/39Zg5>.



Polar bears on the Arctic Refuge coast
- USFWS photo

Polar bears should always be treated with respect and caution. They are large, powerful carnivores that can injure and kill people. Media images of people behaving inappropriately around bears can mislead visitors into thinking risky human actions are safe and have no detrimental impacts on bears. Such mistaken impressions can pose a risk to people and to bears.

This information page helps recreational visitors think about ways to avoid interactions with polar bears while passing safely through the bears' coastal habitats. Visitors to Arctic Refuge are generally aware of the risks associated with wildland pursuits, and commonly plan long, remote routes allowing them to test their mettle in extreme wilderness. Yet there are some difficulties no one should willingly face—such as interacting with a polar bear—no matter how energetic and resilient they are.

Because polar bears are protected under the Marine Mammal Protection Act and Endangered Species Act, every recreational visitor has a responsibility to try to avoid encounters with polar bears. Travelers along the coast of northeast Alaska may now encounter polar bears any month of the year. If you are planning a visit to Arctic Refuge that includes travel along the coast away from structures, use the following practices to minimize your chances of disturbing polar bears; to increase the chances of your safe passage; and to prevent having to kill a polar bear in defense of life.

Be aware of the situation:

- Encountering polar bears is likely while traveling along the Refuge coast because polar bears are increasing their coastal use due to arctic warming and loss of sea ice. (For information about the life history of polar bears, their status, threats to the species, and their management, see <http://go.usa.gov/39Z44>.)
- Polar bears are protected from disturbance by the Endangered Species Act and the Marine Mammal Protection Act. Minimizing your interactions with polar bears is key to avoiding their disturbance and to enjoying an adventure free of human-bear conflicts.
- Close proximity to bears may lead to the injury or death of people or bears. These outcomes are tragic for people and harmful to bear conservation goals.
- Proper conduct around bears requires sorting through inaccurate information and false notions about bears, and using practices recommended by human-bear conflict management specialists based on their observations of bear behavior. Responsible reactions to bears will vary across bear species, among different areas for the same species, among individual bears at the same location, and even at different times for the same individual bear.

Before you go:

- Learn about responsible trip preparation, practices recommended by human-bear conflict management specialists, and characteristics of bear behavior. An educational video about safety in polar bear country can be viewed on request in Fairbanks, Alaska. Contact Arctic Refuge (call 800-362-4546) if you'd like to arrange a time to view the video before you embark on your trip. For web-based safety guidelines and information about bear behaviors see <http://go.usa.gov/39Z4k>.
- Plan your route to avoid camping in coastal areas mid-July through October. Polar bears are increasing their use of the shoreline. It may no longer be possible to avoid polar bear encounters if you plan a coastal trip during these months.
- Increasing your distance from Barter Island when traveling the coast may reduce

your likelihood of encountering bears. (For information about minimizing interactions with polar bears at Barter Island, see <http://go.usa.gov/39ZDGD>.)

- If you must rely on coastal access or egress to accomplish your intended route, make arrangements to minimize the group's time in coastal areas. Travel on the coast only when absolutely necessary.
- If you are committed to using coastal areas, plan a group size that minimizes surprises by allowing for 24 hour bear monitoring, and incorporate camp and travel practices that heighten the group's situational awareness.
- Before your trip, develop and review a group safety plan, and make sure each participant knows how to respond if a bear approaches in a curious, nervous, threatening, or aggressive manner.
- Bring, and know how to properly operate and maintain, bear-resistant storage containers and other equipment, such as binoculars, noise makers, and bear pepper spray, that will help you avoid or end interactions. Use caution when relying on electric fences. They often fail when placed in the dry, unstable soils found along the coast.

While on land at or near the coast:

- Avoid attracting bears. Use bear-resistant storage containers for food and trash to prevent bears from becoming food-conditioned. Food conditioning is generally dangerous for both people and bears. The bear can become more aggressive in its search for food, and nearby people are more likely to find themselves in conflict with the bear.
- Avoid camping on bear travel routes such as beaches, barrier islands, or areas of decreased visibility like fresh water outlets or bluff-edges.
- Locate overnight camps inland. Based on known patterns of land use by polar bears, camping just a mile or two inland will dramatically decrease the chance your camp will be in the path of a polar bear. Be aware, however, that camping inland or along the coast can result in an encounter with a brown bear. Therefore, take bear awareness and conflict-avoidance precautions regardless of where you camp.

- Regularly discuss and rehearse among your group how to interpret and respond to polar bear behaviors, such as how to respond if you spot a bear one mile, 100 meters, or 10 meters away; how to respond if you spot a bear while you are traveling versus a bear coming into camp; and what to do if a bear repeatedly comes into camp.
- Stay within earshot of your group; talk, watch, and listen frequently; be aware of wind direction; and be prepared to respond if your group surprises a bear. Be aware of near-shore ice conditions and the presence of seals, beachcast carcasses, or other attractants that may influence bear movements.
- Consider assigning a dedicated observer to watch for bears if your group is active during low light conditions. Consider sleeping in shifts and posting a guard who will alert others to a nearby polar bear when your group rests. Cooler evening temperatures correlate with more active bear activity, and bears may be more apt to move into your area during night-time hours.

If you have an interaction with a polar bear:

When a person and bear are both aware of each other, how you react can either attract or deter a bear's curiosity. Your group's goal should be to prevent any interaction from escalating into an incident.

Depending on the circumstances, the interaction may require nothing more than your patient and calm attentiveness to the situation, allowing the bear to wander away from your area. Or, your group may simply change its travel path to increase the distance between you and the bear.

When interaction turns into incident:

An incident occurs when you need to take actions to respond to a bear's behavior. Your group's goal should be to protect human life while minimize the duration and negative consequences of the incident. Resolve the situation non-lethally if possible.

Consider the range of actions you could take. Start with the least aggressive options, such as using noise makers, grouping together, yelling or clapping, or deploying air horns. Bear pepper spray is effective—but only at close range and with favorable wind conditions. With wise use of deterrents, your group may

be able to de-escalate the incident by keeping bears from making contact with your camp items, and by eventually increasing distance between you and the bear.

If defense of life becomes necessary:

It is legal for you to kill a polar bear in self-defense or to save the life of a person in immediate danger. However, polar bears are protected by laws to minimize their disturbance. If you kill a polar bear, you will be required to document the circumstances leading up to, and immediately surrounding, the death of the bear, including documentation of the preventive methods you used to de-escalate the conflict in advance of killing the bear.

You must report the defense of life killing of a polar bear to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) within 48 hours by calling 800-362-4546 and asking to speak to the Arctic Refuge Manager; calling 800-362-5148 to reach USFWS Marine Mammals Management and asking to speak to someone in the Polar Bear Program; or calling 907-883-9409 to speak to a USFWS law enforcement officer. If you must leave messages at any of these numbers, provide your name, contact information and location so you can be reached to provide additional information about the incident.

Did you know?

- The Endangered Species Act and Marine Mammal Protection Act allow Native coastal-dwelling peoples to harvest polar bears for subsistence, recognizing the cultural importance of this traditional use. The Marine Mammal Protection Act also designates Alaska Native co-management partners for polar bear conservation. Their involvement helps ensure a responsible harvest.
- The North Slope Inupiat and Canadian Inuvialuit peoples have a voluntary agreement to harvest polar bears in a responsible manner.
- If, while traveling the coast you encounter a dead polar bear, learn what you can do at <http://go.usa.gov/39ZZ29>.
- Federal law identifies wildlife viewing as a priority public use on Refuges if it does not disturb wildlife. Polar bear biologists and land managers work to accommodate public uses while supporting polar bear conservation.
- Authorized commercial photographers, and commercial service providers who offer guided polar bear viewing on waters surrounding Barter Island, are required to adhere to Refuge permit conditions. These conditions ensure polar bears are not disturbed, and require permit-holders to comply with recommended viewing practices.



Camping inland from the coast of Arctic Refuge - USFWS