

MEETING BEARS

A guide for hunters of moose, small mammals, birds and bear

Swedish Association for Hunting and Wildlife Management
Swedish Environmental Protection Agency

HUNTERS are the people who meet most bears in the wild. Bears usually avoid contact with humans. Most meetings with bears are peaceful affairs. One tragic death has occurred in Sweden, however. This article explains what to do if you should come face to face with a bear while hunting moose or other animals with dogs. We also point out some things you should consider when hunting bear. The text is from a brochure produced jointly by the Swedish Association for Hunting and Wildlife Management and the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency.

Few incidents

Meeting a bear is not usually dangerous. Bears avoid contact with humans. But accidents and incidents do occur. A tragic accident occurred in autumn 2004, when a hunter was killed by a wounded bear. He was the first person to be killed by a bear in Sweden in over a hundred years. Some hunters have been injured, and a number of dogs have been injured or killed.

Is it possible to completely eliminate the risk of such accidents? As a hunter, you can avoid incidents and accidents by learning from the experience of others who have met bears, by respecting bears and by exercising caution *whenever* you hunt in bear territory.

Bear body language

A bear's mood can be seen from its body language, although this is very difficult and requires much experience. You can tell a dog's mood from its facial expression, its hair standing on end, its ears and the position of its tail. Even without these signs, those with experience of dogs can interpret them. Bear body language is reminiscent of dog body language, but is nowhere near as obvious.

As a hunter, there are things you should bear in mind if you meet a bear. Did you know, for example, that a bear that approaches a hunter with its ears erect and its head held high is more likely to be curious than aggressive? Bears never attack by rearing up on their hind legs. A bear standing up on its hind legs is trying to gain an overview of the situation; it is not demonstrating its size or preparing to attack.

Meeting bears in different situations

A bear moving across country normally changes course in good time before it meets a human. A hunter lying in wait or moving quietly in the forest may surprise a bear, however. The list below describes various kinds of meetings with bears and their implications.

- An undisturbed bear rarely behaves threateningly. It normally moves away quickly or hides.
- A bear taken by surprise may wish to assess the situation before leaving.
- A bear disturbed by a dog may become irritated, although its irritation focuses mainly on the dog rather than the person with it.
- A bear going into hibernation or having just come out of hibernation must not be disturbed or harassed.

- A bear at a kill or a carcass. Bears may sometimes defend a carcass or prey they have killed against dogs or people, although they usually retire from the scene.
- A female bear with cubs. In most cases a female bear with cubs will try to move them to safety, but if cornered, she may try to defend them.
- An injured bear, unable to escape its pursuers, is a dangerous animal. It may feign an attack or actually attack.

King of the forest

Remember that the bear is the highest-ranking animal in the forest, and is only bested by larger bears or man. The golden rule when in bear territory is to make your presence known by talking in a normal tone of voice. Do not shout, as this may spark an aggressive reaction. Retire cautiously from the area.

- Behave calmly and decidedly, maintaining eye contact with the bear. Withdraw from the spot audibly and visibly, but do not run.
- Do not provoke the bear; show respect for it by backing away.
- Move where the bear can scent you.
- Do not shoot unless you have to. If you do, fire a shot in the air to let the bear know you are there.

Hunting with dogs

How can you avoid unwanted meetings with bears when hunting moose and other animals with dogs? Observe your dog's behaviour. Even dogs that are not used to hunting bear usually show signs when a bear is in the vicinity. In most cases dogs are involved in some way when a bear is shot in self-defence.

Notice whether the dog is tracking or whether it has stopped and is listening. It may climb up on boulders, tussocks and higher terrain. Notice if your dog is acting strangely; perhaps it has turned to its handler for support. Do not be foolhardy or overly curious. It is better to put the dog on a leash and leave the area than to try to find out what has attracted the dog's attention.

A dog's bark can be revealing

Notice how your dog barks in the forest.

- Listen to the tone and frequency of the bark. Is it different from the way the dog normally barks during hunting?
- How long did it take the dog to pick up the scent? Shouldn't the dog have picked up the scent more quickly if it had been a moose? If the scent is picked up in the vicinity, you should be prepared.
- Has the driving dog been following overnight scent, started barking to signal that it has picked up the scent, or has the scent has been picked up unexpectedly? Look out for bears.

Take heed of scents and sounds around you. Can you hear ravens croaking irritably? Can you smell rank meat somewhere close by? Is there offal from moose or other animals in the area? Could it have attracted visitors? Are there fresh bear tracks in the area? Think bear and make sure that you are not taken by surprise.

Dense vegetation

Be careful when the scent is picked up in dense young forest or thickets, where you cannot see the dog or quarry. Can you see your dog, but no other animal, when you ought to be able to have seen whether it is a moose? Retire. The dog may come running towards its handler with a bear or other animal in pursuit. Bears are not the only animals that a dog may bark at

when out hunting. If there is deep enough snow lying in the area to show tracks, you should make sure there are moose tracks close by before you approach a dog standing still and barking in dense vegetation.

Hibernation

Bears normally hibernate when the first snow falls, sometimes earlier. A bear must not be disturbed when it is in, or close to, its winter lair. It will have expended a great deal of energy preparing it and is more reluctant to leave a winter lair than a daytime lair. When a bear has been discovered, it has few avenues of escape. Several bears have been shot in self-defence at their winter lair. Usually a dog has come across a bear in, or close to, its winter quarters. Note that female bears give birth in their winter lair in midwinter, and that the cubs normally hibernate with their mother in the same lair the following winter, and sometimes the next winter as well.

Warning shot

A bear that has been provoked may launch an attack, usually feigned. In an emergency where a bear does attack, you can fire a warning shot.

Having a weapon in your hand usually gives a false sense of security if you meet a bear. To stop a charging bear, your shot must hit the brain, which is not much larger than a tennis ball. Try hitting a bouncing tennis ball coming towards you at 45 km/h. The safest approach is therefore to hold your fire if you possibly can. If your shot does not go straight into the bear's brain, you will have made the situation worse for yourself and for the bear.

Meeting a bear when bear hunting

The bear population is increasing in forested regions, and controlled hunting is permitted in some parts of Sweden so as to reduce the risk of injury or damage. Each year the Swedish EPA decides regional quotas based on information on bear population size and trends. You should practise shooting before hunting bear and choose the right weapon. Do not fire in haste. The bear has a small target area, and you must be familiar with its anatomy. Ideally, you should not hunt bear alone.

Controlled bear hunting is permitted in the counties of Värmland, Dalarna, Gävleborg, Västernorrland, Jämtland, Västerbotten and Norrbotten. Each county receives a quota. In 2006 Norrbotten, Västerbotten and Jämtland were each divided into two zones, with separate quotas. Hunting is no longer permitted once the quota has been met. The county administrative boards have a telephone answering service giving information on the number of bears that have been shot. Always call before you set off hunting. As a hunter, it is your responsibility to obtain the necessary information on hunting issues and the legal position, particularly on your own land:

- Is it the bear hunting season?
- How large is the quota in the region and how much of the county quota remains right now?
- Is the landowner or the hunting team subject to any other restrictions on bear hunting?
- If you shoot a bear, you must report it to the police, whether you do so during the controlled hunting period or at any other time.

- When, where and to whom should I show the bear I have shot? What samples must I take and send to wildlife research?
- Does the landowner charge a fee for bears shot in your area?
- Do you have access to search equipment/a vehicle capable of being used to track a wounded bear?

Controlled bear hunting

Bears are protected, but some hunting has been permitted since 1943. The annual quota remained at 40 – 50 bears a year for many years. The quota has increased sharply over the last few years, and in 2006 the Swedish EPA gave permission for 143 bears to be shot, an increase of 22 on the previous year. The conditions for controlled hunting are set out in these decisions, which you can find on the Swedish EPA website. County administrative boards in counties with resident bear populations can order the killing of individual "problem" bears.

Learning how to hunt and shoot bears

Bear anatomy differs very much from that of ungulates. This is one reason it is very important to practise shooting at various bear targets using the weapon you intend to hunt with. You should be able to use your weapon quickly and naturally.

The Swedish training course and tests for hunting wounded bears (*Eftersök på björn*) offer good opportunities for practice before the real thing. The tests involve rapid shooting of falling targets and bear as a running target. Those intending to shoot from a stationary position should at least have passed a special bear test (*Björnpasset*). Practising rapid shooting is good, but can never change the fact that it is the first shot that counts, and that the first shot must always be a fatal one.

It is important that your weapon is designed for this type of shooting, i.e. with a single fatal shot. A suitable calibre for hunting with dogs is 30-06 or larger. Use a sight that feels reliable and right. A larger calibre may also be suitable for hunting from a stationary position, but any class 1 weapon can be used. A telescopic or red dot sight is recommended.

Hints for hunting with dogs

Ideally, you should hunt in pairs. It is better if there are two of you if a problem arises. Do not quietly approach dogs standing and barking in dense thickets or young forest. A chance to shoot normally arises sooner or later. If you approach too stealthily, you may come across a bear and let off a shot too quickly.

A critical situation for dog and hunter is when the handler approaches the place where the dog is standing and barking and the dog feels the support of the handler. At this point there is a great risk that the dog will behave recklessly and cause the bear to attack it.

Female bears with cubs

You should exercise caution with regard to female bears with cubs. It is forbidden to intentionally shoot cubs and females with cubs. If your dog is pursued by a bear and returns to the same spot, you should retire. A female bear will often place her cubs in safety up a tree if she is harassed by dogs. When you approach dogs standing and barking you should therefore make sure that the bear does not have cubs in a tree nearby.

Shooting from a stationary position

You should clear your post of bushes before the hunt. It may be a good idea to sit in a hunting tower or on a stone. The first shot from a stationary position should be to the flank. It is difficult to shoot a bear head-on. The bear's thorax extends to the base of its throat and is protected by its massive shoulder bones. A head-on shot often results in a wounded bear that must be tracked down, which is a difficult and dangerous task.

The Swedish bear population has increased sharply since the middle of last century. In 2006 the Scandinavian Bear Project estimated that there were between 2,350 and 2,900 bears in Sweden. There are four main bear population strongholds. The Swedish Parliament has decided that these four areas should be allowed to spread and merge with one another.

Caption The area where a shot will be fatal, i.e. the heart and lungs, is smaller in relation to a bear's body area than is the case with deer and wild boar. Aim at the rear edge of the bear's shoulder blade at a height half way up the front of its body. A bear hit in the lung will die within two minutes at most. Only shoot an uninjured bear from the side.

When hunting bear you should avoid shooting from too close range or from too far away. You should be quite sure that you can fire a fatal shot. Take your time and make sure that the first shot is on target. But to be on the safe side, you should immediately prepare your weapon for a second shot if necessary.

Caution – wounded bear

Both hunter and dog can be injured if they approach a bear immediately after it has been shot. A dog may attack a bear when it has been felled, but it may turn out that the bear is not dead. Some hunters have been injured as a result of approaching a bear too quickly. Wait a few minutes and throw something at the bear to make sure it is dead.

Most meetings with bears are entirely peaceful affairs. One tragic death has occurred in Sweden, however. This brochure explains what to do if you should come face to face with a bear while hunting moose or other animals with dogs. We also point out some things you should consider when hunting bear. The brochure has been produced jointly by the Swedish Association for Hunting and Wildlife Management and the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency. English translation by Maxwell Arding.

Read more about bears and other carnivores at the Swedish Association for Hunting and Wildlife Management site www.jagareforbundet.se, the Swedish EPA site www.naturvardsverket.se/english, and the Scandinavian Bear Project site www.bearproject.info.

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