

5 Ways to Attract Bears to Your Campsite

by Sarah Winkler



A bear joins some campers for lunch.

You and your friends are packing up the wagon for some car [camping](#) in the great outdoors. In addition to a couple of tents and multiple sleeping bags, you've packed a cooler full of burgers and hot dogs to slap on the campground grill when you pull in for dinner. And you've stuffed your daypack with peanut-butter-flavored granola bars and a chocolaty trail mix for tomorrow's long hike. One thing's for sure, the eating's going to be great on this trip -- that is, unless one of Mother Nature's most fearsome and powerful creatures decides it wants to share the wealth.

Whether you're car camping like these folks or backpacking deep into the woods, you need to take preventative steps to avoid a [bear encounter](#). A [bear's](#) sense of [smell](#) is seven times stronger than a bloodhound's [source: [American Bear Association](#)]. It uses this acute sense to shop for a mate, detect threats and, most importantly, locate food. If a bear smells your hotdogs sizzling on the grill, it might decide to pop in for a visit.

A bear may lumber into your campsite for attractants like food and trash, and even your scented lip balm. Obviously you can't go without eating while you camp, but you can manage odors to promote bear-free camping quarters.

5. Leave Your Trash Out



Aurora/Getty Images

This cooler is no match to a hungry black bear's jaws and claws.

One surefire way to attract [bears](#) to your campsite is to leave your trash out in the wind. The strong scent of trash entices bears to investigate your area. The problem is, you're probably going to create some trash, somehow, while you camp. So what can you do to make sure it doesn't lure bears? For one, don't attempt to mask the [smell](#) of trash with air fresheners, Lysol or moth balls. The smell of moth balls may not seem delectable to you, but it will double the curiosity for a bear. You might also think it's good idea to toss your trash into the campfire. But bears like the smell of burning trash even more than the smell of regular trash.

Instead, put your garbage in airtight plastic bags and string those between two trees, at least 10 to 15 feet (3 to 4.5 meters) above ground and at least 4 feet (1.2 meters) away from any tree or post. The airtight bags should reduce the scent. And if a bear still catches a whiff, the bag will be too difficult for the animal reach.

You can also store trash in bear-resistant [food](#) canisters, which are usually available for rent at most bear country campsites. Be sure to latch the box completely. At night, place the canister on the ground at least 100 feet (30.5 meters) or more from your campsite. That way, if a bear decides to bat the canister around for a while, he'll be nowhere near your tent.

Lastly, remember that bears can detect human scent for 14 hours after people leave a campsite, so clean up for your sake and for your fellow campers' sakes [source: [American Bear Association](#)].

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4. Camp Near a Carcass



A bear dining on a deer carcass in Yellowstone National Park.

From the outset, [camping](#) near a carcass won't seem like a very appealing prospect. After all, depending on how long the creature's been dead, it could cloud your campsite with a terrible stench. But camping near a carcass isn't merely unappealing -- it also greatly increases the likelihood that a hungry bear will plod into your camp.

[Bears](#) are just lazy enough to relish the opportunity of eating an animal that's already died. The odor of a decomposing carcass definitely will attract any bears in the area. In fact, a black bear in California is reported to have traveled in a straight line more than 3 miles (4.8 kilometers) to reach a dead deer's carcass [source: [American Bear Association](#)].

If you spot a dead animal on the trail, report it to the nearest ranger station. And don't even think about approaching the animal, no matter how curious you are. A bear may be lurking just out of your sight, guarding its find. And it won't be pleased that you're moving in on its lunch.

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3. Keep Food in Your Tent



Veer away from the tent. Veer away from the tent.

If you're looking for a furry bed companion, you should definitely eat and keep all kinds of tasty treats inside your tent. In fact, even your fruity-scented travel-sized bottle of shampoo is enough to invite [bears](#) into your temporary living quarters.

You should never eat anything inside your tent. And you should store your [food](#) just like you store your trash -- string it between trees or put it in a bear canister. As we mentioned before, airtight plastic bags of food should be hung a minimum of 10 to 15 feet (3 to 4.5 meters) from the ground and 4 feet (1.2 meters) away from posts or trees, and canisters can be left on the ground, but 100 feet (30.5 meters) away from your [campsite](#).

Leave especially pungent foods like fresh fruit and sweet drinks at home. In general, dry foods like cereal, pasta and crackers have less of a scent. Keep deodorant, toothpaste, lotion and other good-smelling toiletries out of your tent and store them with your food. Also, be sure to string up or place all pet food in a canister.

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2. Sleep Where You Cook



Right now this man is scenting his tent with hotdog.

After you've cooked up some beans and corn on your [camping](#) stove and roasted marshmallows over the [fire](#), the smell of [food](#) is likely to linger for a while. You might enjoy the aroma of your meal for a few hours. Coincidentally, all the hungry bears in the area will also find the odor appealing.

For this reason, it's best you don't sleep where you've cooked. In fact, your tent should be about 100 yards (91 meters) away and -- even better -- upwind from where you made dinner. Your cooking equipment should be strung up or stored in a canister along with your food, trash and toiletries. And make sure you don't sleep in the same clothes you were wearing as camping chef. That's as good as slathering yourself in corn pudding before you go to sleep. Instead, you should store those clothes with the rest of your strong-smelling gear.

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1. Pee Where You Sleep



A bear uses a visitor center sign as a back scratcher.

Conventional wisdom might lead you to believe that urinating around your [campsite](#) is a good way to mark your territory. Certainly no bear would cross into the claim you've staked with your own excrement, right? Actually, wrong -- the opposite is true. Urine odor attracts [bears](#). So you should do your peeing far from the campsite or dispose of the waste elsewhere.

Let's face it, we've all got to do our business at some point. So, the best way to handle this predicament simply is to walk away from your campsite to tinkle. Or, you could even pee into some kind of bottle or container and dispose of it once you're away from your site. Also, be aware of the direction the wind is blowing when nature calls. The smell could send a signal to bears downwind. On that note, your campsite should be upwind from your urine. When you need to go number two, dig a hole 6 to 8 inches (15 to 20 centimeters) deep and squat. When you're done, cover up the hole and stamp it with your foot. Be sure to do this type of business at least 100 feet (30.5 meters) away from any water source.

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