

## Backcountry Etiquette

Backcountry etiquette helps to ensure wilderness areas don't take on the clutter of the cities we're leaving behind. Nowadays, with more people visiting an ever-shrinking wilderness, it's especially important to respect nature's fragility and minimize our impact upon it. The goal of practising backcountry etiquette is to leave an area no different from the way you found it. Here are some techniques to minimize your footprint.

### Trail Etiquette

When hiking, stay on trails whenever possible. Don't cut off switchbacks or create new paths around puddles or boggy sections. When hiking off trail, avoid sensitive ground like alpine meadows or watercourses. If you must pass over fragile areas, try to stay on the outskirts where your passage won't be visible to the next passer-by. Avoid stepping on plants by walking on rocks or compacted soil.

### The Campsite

Choose the least vulnerable surface available for your campsite. The best locations are on snow, sand or gravel because they are easily restored to their natural state. Areas like meadows or tundra, which have fragile plant cover, are easily damaged. Once you've found a suitable site, take a good look at the area so you can return it to its original condition when you leave. Before leaving check for any garbage left behind, and pack out everything you brought in.

### Campfires

A campfire, is a warm, wonderful thing. If you decide you must have one, make sure the ecosystem can tolerate it and that you build it in an environmentally sensitive manner. Don't build a fire in dry or windy areas due to the danger of forest fire. Never leave a fire unattended, and keep water nearby in case it spreads.

To build a fire pit, dig a small pit down to mineral soil, and remove the sod carefully so you can replace it when the fire is out. Don't ring the fire with rocks because the stones will be scarred. After breaking camp, make sure the fire is out by feeling the ashes with your bare hand. Take the ashes into the woods and scatter them so they won't be visible or alter the soil's chemistry. Finally, return the dirt to the fire pit, replace the sod and fill in the edges with dirt.

### Latrines and Catholes

The best way to dispose of human waste in the wilderness depends on a number of factors: size of the party, level of traffic and amount of heat and moisture present. In all areas, dispose of faecal matter at least 100 metres away from water sources or trails. Burn toilet paper, and carry out items such as sanitary napkins that can't be reduced to ashes.

With smaller groups, the best way to bury waste is in a "cathole" no bigger than half a foot wide and deep. When finished, replace the dirt and camouflage the site with natural litter. For larger groups, particularly in popular areas, a larger latrine is better than an abundance of catholes. To dig a latrine, find an area with ground cover. Cut a hole about a foot wide and deep. Remove the upper layer of sod intact; place in a cool place and water regularly to keep any vegetation alive. When the latrine is full to within four or five inches of the top, return the dirt, replace the sod and camouflage the site.

### Washing Up

Protecting water sources in the wilderness is of foremost concern. If you must use soap to either wash dishes or bathe, please only use a proven biodegradable soap and never drain the soap into the water source. Take the drain water well away from the water source to dispose of it in a spot devoid of plants. If you need an abrasive, try sand, pinecones or gravel.

## Bears in the Backcountry

While travelling in the backcountry, remember that this wonderful place you holiday in is home to all kinds of native plants and animals – including, perhaps, the mighty bear. Bears are wonderfully powerful, and fascinating, creatures. Did you know that they can run as fast as racehorses, both up and down hill?

All bears have good eyesight and hearing as well as an exceptionally keen sense of smell. Black bears and young grizzlies are also agile climbers, even mature grizzlies have been known to occasionally make it up to the lowest branches of a tree. All bears are strong swimmers. They also have a reputation for being rather fierce – every bear defends a "personal space", which varies in size considerably from bear to bear. They will also aggressively defend their food, and everyone knows not to get between a mama bear and her cubs!

Most people are interested in learning how to defend themselves if attacked, but bears are unpredictable and your defence would depend on your ability to quickly and accurately identify the species of bear you are facing. The best thing to do is to avoid a confrontation altogether. Take precautions to ensure that you neither startle a bear, nor attract one to your campsite.

### Avoiding Bears on the Trail

Bears are usually out and about from May to October, with most encounters occurring during August and September. When you are heading into bear country, check with your local park authorities to find out about recent bear activity. Most parks known to have active bears will have additional tips on how they would like you to behave. Be extra cautious if travelling with children or dogs. Keep children in sight and dogs on a leash. During peak bear season it is recommendable to leave your dog at home.

Bears can be active at any time of day, but are particularly active at dawn and at dusk, so try not to be on the move during these times. Stay on designated trails and comply with any posted warnings. Be alert and aware of your surroundings and make noise as you go. Noise lets a bear know that you are approaching and will give it time to get out of your way. Bears are naturally fearful of humans and, given the chance, will avoid a direct confrontation. If you spot a bear in the distance, make a wide detour or, if possible, leave the area. Do not approach even if the bear seems uninterested in your presence.

If a bear approaches you, do not run. If it is standing up or sniffing the air, it is most likely trying to identify you. Help it make the correct identification: non-threatening human. Move away while keeping it in view. Speak in a low and calm voice, and don't make direct eye contact. Remember that you are an uninvited guest, and the bear is most likely feeling defensive.

Occasionally a bear will mock-charge, turning away at the last minute. But if you are in the middle of a mid-day snack the bear is most likely after your food and won't be deterred, so your best bet is to abandon your lunch and leave the area immediately. Always let the park authorities know of such an encounter. Food-conditioned bears lose their natural fear of humans and can become increasingly bold as they

associate people with an easy meal. Bears that become conditioned to eating human food almost never lose their taste for it, and park rangers are often forced to destroy them. Do not intentionally feed or leave food for a bear – or any other wildlife for that matter!

### **Keeping Your Campsite Bear-Free**

These housekeeping guidelines will minimize the chances of your campsite being ransacked by a bear:

- Bears have a very keen sense of smell. Eliminate as many attractive odours as possible. These include your food and garbage, as well as cosmetics, insect repellents, sunscreen, and toothpaste.
- Separate your tent, cooking area, and food cache by at least 100 metres. Put the cache and cooking area downwind of the tent.
- If the area you are camping in provides bear caches, use them. If there are no caches, use trees. Bring along a sturdy stuff sack and about 30 metres of rope or cord. The bag should be 3-5 metres off the ground, 2 metres from the trunk and 1 metre below any branches. Where there are no trees it may be possible to suspend the bag over a steep cliff.
- Other critters will also try to get at your food. Racoons are very adept at undoing knots and zippers if there are corners and spaces for them to grasp. You can use special animal-proof bags, designed to be difficult to open for creatures without opposable thumbs.
- Clean up your leftovers or spilt food immediately. Dispose of dishwater by straining it and then throwing it into running water or a toilet pit. Fish smells are particularly attractive to bears, so clean any fish you might catch before you head back to camp, disposing of entrails in either deep or fast-flowing water. Double-bag any fishy-smelling garbage.
- Always pack all your garbage out with you. Bears will dig up any buried garbage and fires rarely burn absolutely everything. Don't contribute to creating a food-conditioned bear, as it almost always results in the bear being put down.