Food Handling and Storage Strategies

A well-supplied backpack can transform a recreational walker into

* a wilderness adventurer
* a model of self-sufficiency
* a movable grocery store

It's true. A bulging backpack may say "outdoor explorer" to you, but to the resident animal population of a wilderness area it may shout "lunch wagon!" The savvy hiker understands this backcountry truth and comes equipped with strategies for keeping his or her food secure at all hours of the day.

This clinic describes:

Why proper food storage is important.
How it's done.
Food-handling tips for grizzly country.

Altering Animal Behavior

Human food has become powerfully attractive to wild animals that inhabit North American wilderness areas—squirrels, chipmunks, pikas, mice, raccoons, goats, marmots, bears, even gray jays and deer.

These animals are instinctive foragers and are not naturally inclined toward the foods people consume. Yet when people become careless or haphazard with their food—or worse, when they intentionally offer critters their cheese puffs or other manufactured edibles—wild animals get a taste of something new and intense, and their customary food-seeking habits are negatively transformed.

"Bears like any food, and human foods are appealing because they taste good and bears consider them easy to get," says Jeff Watson, a bear-handler who works with the television and film industry. "Bears always take the shortest route possible to get their calories, and over the years they've learned humans tend to be an easy source of food. Bears are easy to train, but you can never untrain them."

When an animal gets a taste of human food, it's going to want more—lots more—and will go to extremes to get it. Bears and raccoons show remarkable determination and ingenuity in their pursuit of a free lunch.

A Few Facts to Ponder

* In 1998, bears in Yosemite National Park broke into more than 1,300 parked vehicles, causing more than $630,000 in damage. Intelligent, powerful and persistent, bears also possess a sense of smell 100 times stronger than a dog's. They visually recognize food coolers and associate them with food, and will smash a vehicle's window to get at one. Or, if they sense something interesting is locked in the trunk of a car, they will break a rear window and then claw through the back seat to get at the item.

* The number of vehicle break-ins dropped to 318 in 1999 due to an intensive education program by park rangers in campgrounds. A new Yosemite policy forbids visitors (except those in motor homes) to store food in their vehicles when parked. Instead, food must be placed in one of more than 2,000 metal "bear boxes" scattered among campgrounds and parking areas.

Tip: If you start an overnight backpacking trip in Yosemite Valley, you will be assigned to park your vehicle in a dirt lot near the valley's east end. Years ago that area served as the Curry Village dump! That means generations of bears have been conditioned to prowl that area for food. Be sure to leave nothing aromatic inside your car when parking here; definitely use the bear boxes provided.

* In 1999, 3 "problem" bears were put to death; 33 others had to be relocated, though a wildlife biologist acknowledges that within a week nearly all relocated bears return to the area where they were captured.

"A fed bear," says bear-handler Jeff Watson, "is a dead bear. The real problem is people who make it too easy for bears to get at their food."

Jim Miller, program manager for dispersed recreation for the US Forest Service, agrees. "Wild animals are natural foragers," he says. "Any time you introduce a new food into their habitat, animals are going to take an interest in it, and that's expected. But having access to human food disrupts an animal's natural foraging instincts. It's important for people to store their food correctly so animals can't get at it."

Save the Animals

Some newcomers to national parks or wilderness travel are annoyed, even offended, by the notion that 4-legged food thieves may be lurking in the woods. Don't be. You are the visitor in their habitat, and it is your responsibility to make your food supply—a foreign substance in the wilderness—as undetectable and unobtainable as possible.

And it is a responsibility. If you are careless or sloppy with food, your actions may put other people at risk of food thievery (since animals regularly revisit areas where food is easily obtained), or they can lead directly to the death of a wild animal—particularly a bear.

"When people don't store their food effectively, a bear steals it and the people suffer a loss," says Harold Werner, a wildlife biologist at Sequoia and Kings Canyon national parks in California's Sierra Nevada. "The real loss, though, comes later.

"Bears become habituated to human food, then turn fairly bold in their efforts to get more. As they get more aggressive they become more dangerous, and at that point we have a legal obligation to kill them. No one likes doing that.

"We want people to store food correctly and keep it safe, but more importantly we want to preserve a resource—in this case, the bears. Any storage

requirements we put in place are not designed to protect people, but protect bears."

If you'd like more information on the importance of proper food storage in parks and wilderness areas, refer to our bear canisters/containers clinic and its related links.

Here are some options for storing food when you are in a park's frontcountry or deep in its backcountry.

Tactics to Protect Food, Safeguard Animals

Land management agencies, including the National Park Service, endorse no single food-defense strategy. Each unit of the Park Service establishes an individual policy appropriate for its resident wildlife. As described later, the rules become especially important when you're camping in grizzly territory.

Some guidelines, however, do apply to all food storage situations:

* Never leave your food, even if it's still in your pack, unattended at any time of day.
* Anything aromatic—powder, ointment, toothpaste, sunscreen, bug spray, lotions, utensils—must be stored overnight along with your food. Animals aren't picky; they're drawn by any exotic smells.
* Leave nothing inside your pack overnight, and leave all pockets and compartments unzipped. This allows any nocturnal visitors to snoop around without tempting them to gnaw at or shred your gear out of curiosity.
* Store your food at least 100 feet (preferably 200 feet or more) away from your sleeping area. The food stash should be downwind of your site, if possible.

So, where should food go when you're asleep or away on a day trip?

Bear Boxes

The availability of bear boxes—large metal containers with hinged, latched openings—varies. Yosemite has more than 2,000 bear boxes within its boundaries, but only 10 are found in the backcountry, scattered among its popular High Sierra Camps. The rest are found only in campgrounds and parking areas. In Sequoia and Kings Canyon national parks, meanwhile, bear boxes are located at a few dozen popular backcountry campsites.

Our advice is simple: If they're available, use them. Some tips:

* At campgrounds, make sure your items are identified. Food coolers and grocery bags can be easily confused.
* Don't use boxes as trash receptacles, even if others have done so in the past.
* Make sure you properly close and secure all latches after each visit.

Bear Wires

Bear wires are cables strung high between well-spaced trees, enabling people to suspend food bags (via counterbalancing, explained below) above the reach of a standing bear. Cables scattered throughout Yosemite's backcountry, most at least 25 years old, will be removed starting in 2000. Rangers believe bears have too often clawed at the bark and dug at the roots of trees supporting the

cables. Wires, meanwhile, remain in use at Olympic National Park. The chief advantage of using a cable: It saves you the effort of trying to find the ideal tree branch to use for counterbalancing.

Bear Poles

Bear poles are tall metal poles with hooklike arms at their pinnacles. Usually a lifting pole is hooked to the side of the main pole. Hikers hoist bear bags (or their entire packs) up to the hooks for safekeeping overnight. Mount Rainier and Glacier national parks provide bear poles at their backcountry campsites. Bear poles, as long as they're built high enough (and that's not always a given), are convenient and easy to use. The biggest challenge: It can be tough to be the last camper to hang your stash on a crowded night.

Bear-Resistant Containers

Hard-sided, secure-locking food containers, often referred to as bear canisters, are portable food lockers that have been used in the backcountry since the mid-1980s. In some national parks, such as the high country of Yosemite, use of such containers is mandatory. We discuss these devices in detail in our bear canisters/containers clinic.

Bear Hangs

Counterbalancing—This can be a frustrating job. Do it enough times and the thought of toting a bear canister becomes less objectionable. The procedure:

* Divide your food and aromatic items into 2 bags. Nylon stuff sacks will do. Try to keep them equally weighted.
* Locate the perfect branch. Backpackers may hike a lifetime without finding one, but here's what to look for: a live branch, one that cannot support a cub's weight, at least 20 feet high and extending at least 10 feet away from the trunk.
* Take a length of cord, at least 50 feet of parachute cord (about 1/8" in diameter), and tie a rock on one end. Toss the rock over a spot near the far end of the tree branch. (Note: Do this when you have plenty of light.)
* Retrieve the rock and tie the cord to one bag. Put a loop in the cord that you can use for snagging the bag in the morning. Pull the bag all the way up to the branch.
* Reach high on the remaining cord and tie the second bag as high as you can. Create another loop. Stuff the remaining cord in the top of the bag.
* Toss the second bag up (or push it up with a stick), ideally getting the two bags to dangle side by side about 12 feet off the ground. Before you do this, make sure you have access to a stick long enough to snag the loops you created.
* A retrieval option: Fasten a strand of barely visible fishing line to one of the bags so you can reel in your bags without having to swat at them with a stick.
* Bear bagging suggestions from Yosemite National Park.

Bear-Bagging—

* Place your food and aromatic items in 1 or 2 bags.
* Find 2 trees about 20-25 feet apart.
* Take a 100-foot length of parachute cord, tie a rock on one end and toss it over a branch about 18-20 feet above the ground.

* Tie one end to one tree trunk. Then tie your food bag or bags to the midpoint of the length of cord.
* Toss the weighted end of the cord over a branch in the second tree.
* Pull the cord across that branch until the food bag is suspended in midair between the two trees. Tie off the cord on the second tree trunk. Two 50-foot sections of cord, with food bags tied at their junction, can also work. In some areas, though not many, it's still possible to toss a cord over a relatively high tree branch, hoist up your bags and simply tie off the cord to a tree trunk. This is a big risk in most areas, though. A bear will recognize this old ploy and quickly gnaw through the cord to make your bags drop.

Some people dangle food bags over the side of a ledge. But: Will the cord hold? Will small rodents discover it and gnaw their way in? Might a bear claw at the cord and make it snap? A ledge-hang might work, but it's less than ideal.

If you are in the desert and no trees are available, it's still a smart idea to keep your food items off the ground. If you're carrying a camera tripod, you could suspend a food bag from it and keep it safe from mice.

If a black bear enters your camp, make noise. Bang pots, wave your arms, shout, even throw a few small rocks at the bear's backside (not its head) from a distance. But don't approach it. If it has some of your items, do not try to retrieve them. Don't corner a black bear; it might respond aggressively. A charge is often a bluff. If a black bear (not a grizzly) should attack you, though, fight back fiercely.

Food Handling and the Grizzly Factor

Always check first with rangers about wildlife activity in the area you are visiting. Heed whatever advice is given.

Here are food-handling tips that apply in grizzly territory; they're also smart moves in places where black bears are known to be active.

* Cook meals 100 yards away from your sleeping site, preferably downwind.
* Opt for freeze-dried meals rather than more aromatic items that require more simmering and stove-top preparation.
* Avoid wiping your hands on your clothing; store the clothing you use while cooking with your food stash.
* Try to avoid leftovers. Store any exposed food item in a zippered storage bag. Double-bagging is a good idea in areas of known bear activity.
* Use minimal soap and no toothpaste in areas active with bears.
* Everything with any kind of aroma, edible or inedible, goes in your food stash. So do all pots, utensils and trash, especially food wrappers.
* When washing pots in black bear country, widely disperse the rinse water far from your sleeping area, and do so on rocks. Traces of salt may linger and marmots, rodents or goats may come along and shred plants in a search for a food-like scent.
* Before entering grizzly territory, ask rangers for guidance on rinse water. Sometimes they may advise you to pour it into a flowing stream. In this circumstance, consider licking your pot clean to minimize any residue.
* Never leave food scraps behind. This rewards animals inclined toward food-snitching. Keep a scrupulously clean camp.

* Never, ever feed a wild animal, no matter how cute it might be. If you do, you are disrupting its foraging instincts and rewarding unnatural behavior.
* Do NOT try to retrieve anything any bear has in its possession.
* Ask local rangers how to respond to a grizzly entering your camp.

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