



## FAQs: Living with Bears in Marin County

This sheet answers some common questions regarding increasing sightings of black bears in Marin County, and how we can build a bear-friendly culture here in Marin. If you have more questions, see the sources and contact information provided at the end of the document. You may also want to view [this One Tam webinar about living with bears in Marin](#) held in September 2023.



### **Q. Why are we seeing more black bears in Marin County? How many bears are in Marin?**

A. Black bear sightings have increased in Marin County over the last several years. Black bear populations across the state have been increasing in general, even doubling. However, they are still considered a rare species in Marin County.

Previously we have seen young males moving in and out of the county to forage seasonally, and we are now seeing more bears staying in the area year-round. Young bears must disperse from their mothers to live on their own, typically before they are two years old. Bears need a large area to forage for food and are mostly solitary, so they cover great distances in search of food.

This is exciting because we have not had them in the county for over a hundred years, save several isolated sightings. [Our 2016 report on the health of Mt. Tamalpais](#) recounted that “the grizzly bear (*Ursus arctos*) was fairly common in the San Francisco Bay Area at the time of the Gold Rush in 1848, but was gone from northern California by 1902 and extirpated statewide by 1924 (Carroll et al., 2001). Some anecdotal information suggests that American black bears (*Ursus americanus*) benefited from rapid removal of grizzly bears after the start of the Gold Rush. The species was documented on Mt. Tam, but Marin County’s last black bear was removed from Redwood Creek Canyon in 1880 (Auwaeter & Sears, 2006).”

We do not know how many individual bears are present in Marin at this time.

### **Q. Is it good to see more black bears in Marin?**

A. Yes! Black bears are an important part of California ecosystems. They are sometimes called “ecosystem engineers” because they disperse seeds, move nutrients from marine to terrestrial ecosystems by feeding on salmonids and carcasses (this was probably much more prevalent when there were more bears and salmon), feed on deer fawns and insects. Plus, this means that there is connectivity between local habitat and areas to the north – this is good for bears and other wildlife, too.

They were more numerous across the continent before colonization, with an estimated population size of 2 million across the continent, but have declined due to hunting and habitat loss to about 200,000, according to the [NPS](#). In California, [CDFW](#) estimates we have a population of 30-40,000. More recent population increases are good for the bears and good for the habitats they live in.

**Q. Where do black bears typically live?**

A. Black bears are widely distributed across North America, they are adaptable to different food sources and habitats. They are most often found in forested areas/where there are trees. Learn more about black bears' lives in the resources below!

**Q. What do black bears eat?**

A. They are omnivores (they eat both plants and animals) and have a varied and opportunistic diet depending on what is seasonally available where they are, including largely (90% or more) nuts, fruits, and vegetation, as well as some insects, fish, or other animals.

**Q. What kind of bears do we have in California?**

A. In California, the black bear (*Ursus americanus*) is currently our only species of bear. (In North America, there are also polar bears (*Ursus maritimus*) in the Arctic region and grizzly, or brown, bears (*Ursus arctos*) in Alaska, the northern Cascades, and Rocky Mountain regions.) The black bear is present in all lower 48 states. Despite the name, black bears can also be shades of brown to blond. They are the smallest of the three bear species, with a height of about three feet when on all fours and males weighing up to 600 pounds, females typically weighing less. Size is not always the best indicator – if you're visiting an area where both grizzly bears and black bears could be present, [know the difference](#).

**Q. What should I do if I see a bear? Are black bears dangerous?**

A. Keep your distance if you see a bear – while it may be exciting to view a bear, it is best to avoid an encounter if possible. Never approach a bear or cubs, and do not surprise a bear if it appears unaware of your presence. Speaking softly to a bear can help avoid surprising it, and it's also important to be aware of your surroundings and allow a bear to have escape routes.

If you do have an encounter with a bear, in general one's response to a bear depends on its behavior and the situation, with an escalating level of response. Attacks by black bears are extremely rare and they typically avoid people. See [guidance from NPS](#), which includes:

**Do not run.** Remain calm and speak calmly to the bear. Pick up small children. Make yourself appear as large as possible by grouping together with other people, moving to higher ground, etc. Back away slowly, always facing the bear, and leave the area/take a detour if possible.

If the bear continues to approach, try to scare it away by making yourself as large as possible and make loud noises. Fight back if attacked – never play dead with a black bear.

**Q. What should I do if a bear was seen in my neighborhood?**

A. Do not leave food out for any animals – bears can be attracted by bird feeders, pet food, garbage, fruit trees, grills, and compost. Make sure you are storing garbage in secure, bear-resistant bins, and do not put your garbage out for collection earlier than necessary.

It is important for both community safety and the bears' that we do not encourage them to look for human food sources, but to maintain their natural diets and stay wary of people – as with all wildlife. Bears can habituate to human garbage and teach their cubs to do the same.

More useful tips for homeowners and renters can be found through the CA Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) [here](#). Pets can best be kept safe by keeping them on a leash outside the home and feeding them indoors – more about bears and dogs specifically can be found [here](#).

If you see a bear in your neighborhood, please contact our CDFW office: (707) 428-2002 or [askbdr@wildlife.ca.gov](mailto:askbdr@wildlife.ca.gov)

**Q. Who should I contact if I am concerned about a bear sighting?**

A. If you see a bear in your neighborhood, you should contact your CDFW office – for Marin that is Region 3: (707) 428-2002 or [AskBDR@wildlife.ca.gov](mailto:AskBDR@wildlife.ca.gov)

- For wildlife issues, contact your CDFW Regional Office (Marin is part of the [CDFW Bay Delta Region](#)) at (707) 428-2002 or [AskBDR@wildlife.ca.gov](mailto:AskBDR@wildlife.ca.gov)
- Or the Human-Wildlife Conflict hotline at (707) 944-5531
- [Resource factsheet from CDFW Region 3](#)

If you find sick, injured, dead, aggressive, rabies-suspect wildlife, or wildlife in distress, please call [Marin Humane](#) (415) 883-4621 to report it.

If you are concerned about seeing a bear in a park or open space, you can contact the relevant agency contact below:

- National Parks: Golden Gate National Recreation Area & Muir Woods National Monument via email at [goga\\_public\\_affairs@nps.gov](mailto:goga_public_affairs@nps.gov) or call the 24-hour park dispatch center:
  - Non-Emergency: 415-561-5505
  - Emergency: 415-561-5656
- State Parks: Natural Resource Program Manager Cyndy Shafer, [cyndy.shafer@parks.ca.gov](mailto:cyndy.shafer@parks.ca.gov)
- Marin County Parks: [parks-communications@marincounty.org](mailto:parks-communications@marincounty.org)
- Marin Water: Natural Resource Program Manager Carl Sanders, [csanders@marinwater.org](mailto:csanders@marinwater.org)

If you see bear scat or manage to take photos from a safe distance, upload them to [iNaturalist](#). A collection of casual records from Marin can provide valuable information over time.

If you see scat in Marin, contact trained community scientists from [North Bay Bear Collaborative](#) at [info@beingwithbears.org](mailto:info@beingwithbears.org).

**Q. Do you see bears in the Marin Wildlife Watch cameras?**

A. [Marin Wildlife Watch](#) is a One Tam community science program that uses motion-activated cameras to study wildlife, mostly mammals, in the Mt. Tamalpais region. We have spotted black bears sporadically in images captured by these cameras.

However, we collect data from these cameras quarterly, and it takes volunteers and staff some time to analyze it. So, at a minimum we are viewing images that are three months old, and we can't

say where any animal is in real time. What's more, this is a population-level study, and we cannot track individual animals or say exactly how many individuals there are with this data.

In the future, once more data is analyzed, we will be able to say more about black bear presence in the region through this project.

**Q. How can we live well alongside bears?**

A. We can coexist with bears in our midst!

- Learn more about bears – educate yourself about living with bears, their lives, and why they are important and interesting creatures! And how to stay safe living and recreating in bear habitat. A list of sources for this FAQ and more resources is provided below and is a good place to start.
- Be bear aware – to protect yourself and the bears, follow guidance from our agency partners on how to be bear aware both in your neighborhood and when enjoying parks and open space (see more below).
- Share – tell your neighbors and friends what you are learning.

**Sources & More Resources to Learn about Black Bears:**

North Bay Bear Collaborative - <https://beingwithbears.org/>

California Department of Fish & Wildlife

- <https://wildlife.ca.gov/Keep-Me-Wild/Bear>
- <https://nrm.dfg.ca.gov/FileHandler.ashx?DocumentID=57519>

US Forest Service - <https://www.fs.usda.gov/visit/know-before-you-go/bears/faqs>

BearWise - <https://bearwise.org/all-about-black-bears/>

National Park Service

- <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/bears/index.htm>
- <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/bears/safety.htm>
- <https://www.nps.gov/articles/bearsafetyfood.htm>
- [https://www.nps.gov/pore/learn/nature/black\\_bears.htm](https://www.nps.gov/pore/learn/nature/black_bears.htm)

National Wildlife Foundation - <https://www.nwf.org/Educational-Resources/Wildlife-Guide/Mammals/black-bear>

Nature Mapping Foundation -

[http://naturemappingfoundation.org/natmap/ca/facts/mammals/american\\_black\\_bear.html](http://naturemappingfoundation.org/natmap/ca/facts/mammals/american_black_bear.html)

North American Bear Center - <https://bear.org/quick-black-bear-facts/>

One Tam

- “Living with bears” webinar, including speakers from North Bay Bear Collaborative, California State Parks, and California Department of Fish & Wildlife - <https://youtu.be/cFn4L-XLxPU%C2%A0>

See additional resources shared during the event - <https://www.onetam.org/living-bears-marin-0>

- [Our 2016 report on the health of Mt. Tamalpais](#), specifically [Chapter 11 which discusses mammals](#).