

Animals: Identification, Encounters, and Safety

In the Pacific Northwest region, there are many large animals that you may encounter in the backcountry. It is important to be able to identify these different animals and know the proper action to take in case of an encounter. Remember, when going out into the wilderness, we are entering these animals homes, they're not entering ours.

Some common large animals found in the Pacific Northwest include grizzly and black bears, cougars, wolves, coyotes, Bobcats (or Lynx), elk, moose, deer, and wolverines. Some smaller animals include rodents (squirrels, chipmunks, and mice), bats, beavers, and rabbits. Being able to identify some of these different animals will help for determining how to handle encounters.

Identification:

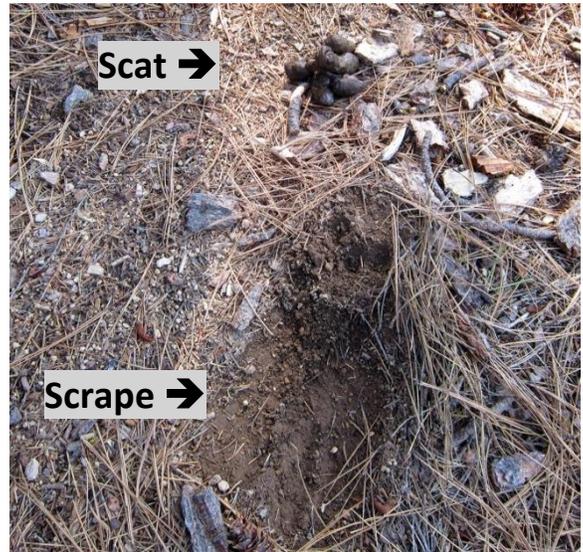
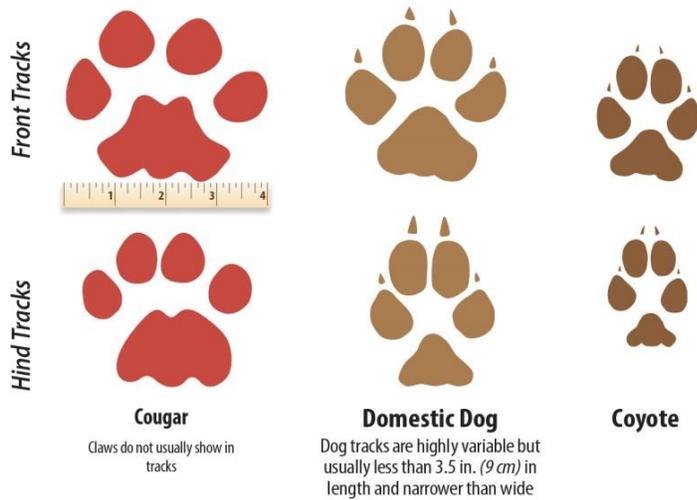
Bears are abundant in the Pacific Northwest. The more common bear to see is the black bear, which lives in a larger geographical range. It is smaller and also the more timid of black and grizzly bears but is more of a scavenger finding its way into towns and neighborhoods. The grizzly bear (also known as the brown bear) is found mainly in Alaska and Canada but also resides in the Northern Cascades, western region of Montana, and the Wyoming, Montana and Idaho connecting boarder.

[For a map of bear locations in North America: <http://geology.com/stories/13/bear-areas/>]

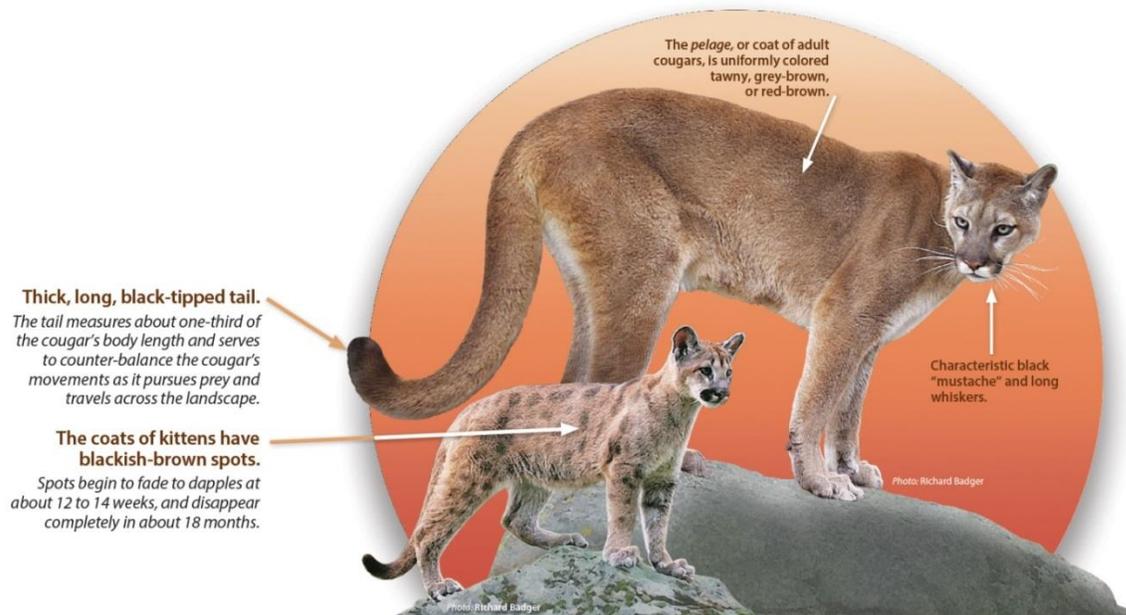
Grizzlies are more aggressive and often larger. Although the bear color is used to identify the two bear types, it's important to know that fur color can range and a grizzly may appear as a black bear based on this. The image below shows more consistent ways for identifying the two bear types.



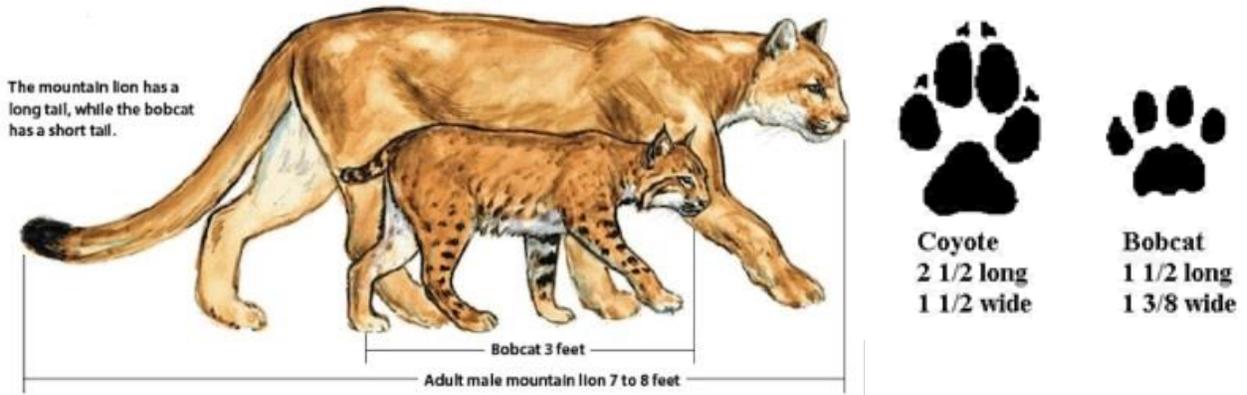
Cougars are the largest member of the cat family living in North America. Cougars are often hard to spot because of their predator behaviors. Identifying the presence of a cougar may be based on tracks or cougar scrapes (scrape marks male cougars make along trails, canyons, caves and ridgelines), or there is a kill nearby that is covered in dirt or debris for the cougar to return later to feed (this action is known as cache). There may also be a large presence of scavenger birds almost to tip off the presence of a cougar. Cougar tracks have four toes and an M shaped heel with three lobes at the base and their claws usually don't show. See the image below for comparison of cougar tracks with other animals.



If you happen to see a large cat you believe to be a cougar, there are some distinctive features to note. An adult cougar has a uniform grey-brown or red-brown coat, a black “mustache” with white long whiskers, and a thick, long, black tipped tail. A cougar kitten has blackish brown spots, and is obviously much smaller than the adult cougar which can be 7-8 feet long head to tail tip.



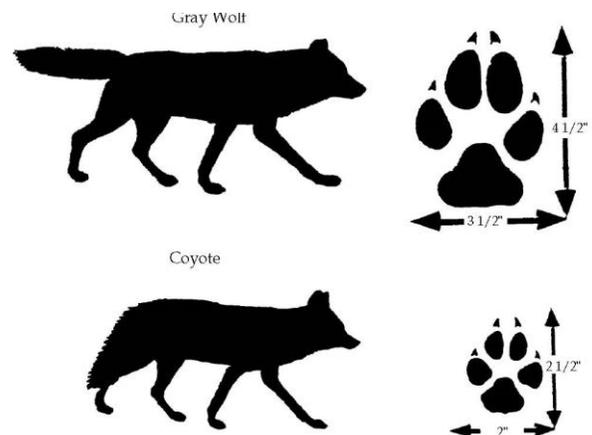
Bobcats are a reclusive member of the cat family and are not often seen. They can range from the size of a house cat to twice that at 3 feet long. They rarely have conflicts with humans and most interactions involve human owned animals such as poultry, small goats and house cats. Bobcats are spotted and have a short tail. Be sure to use tail length to identify a bobcat from a cougar kitten.



Wolves and coyotes typically avoid humans and are easy to miss – identify due to their similarities. The biggest differences to know are that wolves, specifically grey wolves which are the most common in the Pacific Northwest region, are larger than coyotes. They also have shorter, rounded ears whereas a coyote has pointed larger ears. Below is a comparison chart for identifying the two.



	Wolves	Coyotes
Weight (adults)	60–120 pounds	25–45 pounds
Shoulder Height	27–33 inches	20–22 inches
Total Length	5–6 feet	3.5–4.5 feet
Ears	Erect, round & furry	Erect, pointed & furry
Head	Large, long, blocky snout, low forehead	Long, pointed snout, low forehead



Some other animals to be aware of are **moose, elk, deer and smaller critters**. While they are not predatory, they are still wild animals and an encounter could be harmful. These animals are also more likely to wander into a campsite to scavenge for food. Below are some prints of smaller animals found in the Pacific Northwest.



Prevention:

Being aware of the types of animals you may run into in the backcountry is important and will help with knowing the correct moves in the case of an encounter. Our goal however, is to make the probability of a run in with a predatory animal as low as possible through preventative methods.

Bear Bagging is something that takes a bit of effort but can be ultimately helpful for avoiding run-ins with the large mammals, especially in bear country. Bear bags are large stuff sacks hung away from camp for storing items such as food, toothpaste, deodorant, even trash, and anything else that has a distinct smell that a bear might be attracted to. To construct one, you'll need a rope at least 50', 1-2 carabiners and a stuff sack. Bear bags should be hung at least 200 feet downwind from camp and the kitchen area.

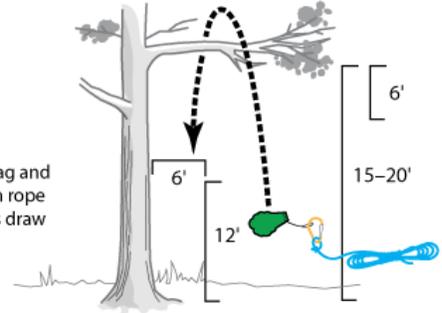
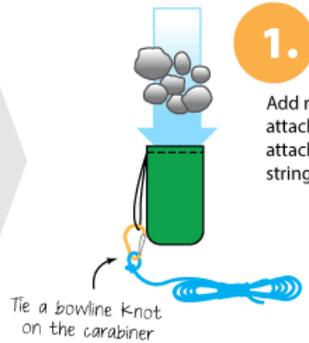
Two techniques for bear bagging we will discuss are single tree and two tree bear bagging. *The Pacific Crest Trail (PCT) style* of bear bagging involves one tree with a sturdy branch that extends at least four feet out. The image on the next page labeled the "PCT" method walks through the steps and equipment needed. Note that the equipment may be improvised on your trip such as tying the rope to a rock instead of bringing a small throw bag and filling it with rocks. *The Two Tree Method* is great if there is a large population of trees with enough space between them where a bear can't climb out onto the branches to retrieve the bag. The bottom diagram on the next page shows how to use this method. Both types of bear bagging are effective, however it is up to you to decide which to use based on your surroundings.

Note: Wearing a **bear bell** to make noise on the trails can also prevent bear encounters.

HANGING A BEAR BAG—THE "PCT" METHOD

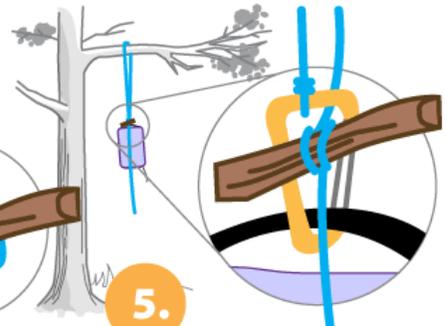
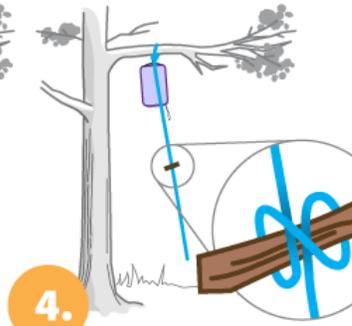
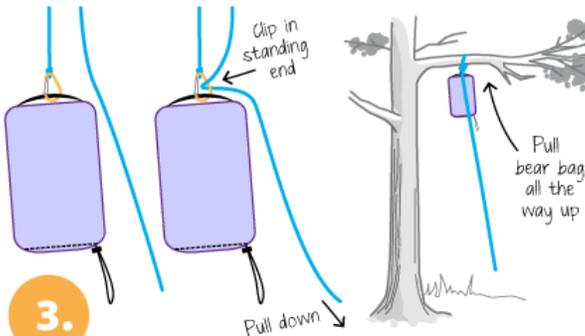
Illustration ©2013 by Derek Hansen, TheUltimateHang.com

If hung "upside down" be sure to tie a slippery overhand knot to prevent the cord lock from loosening

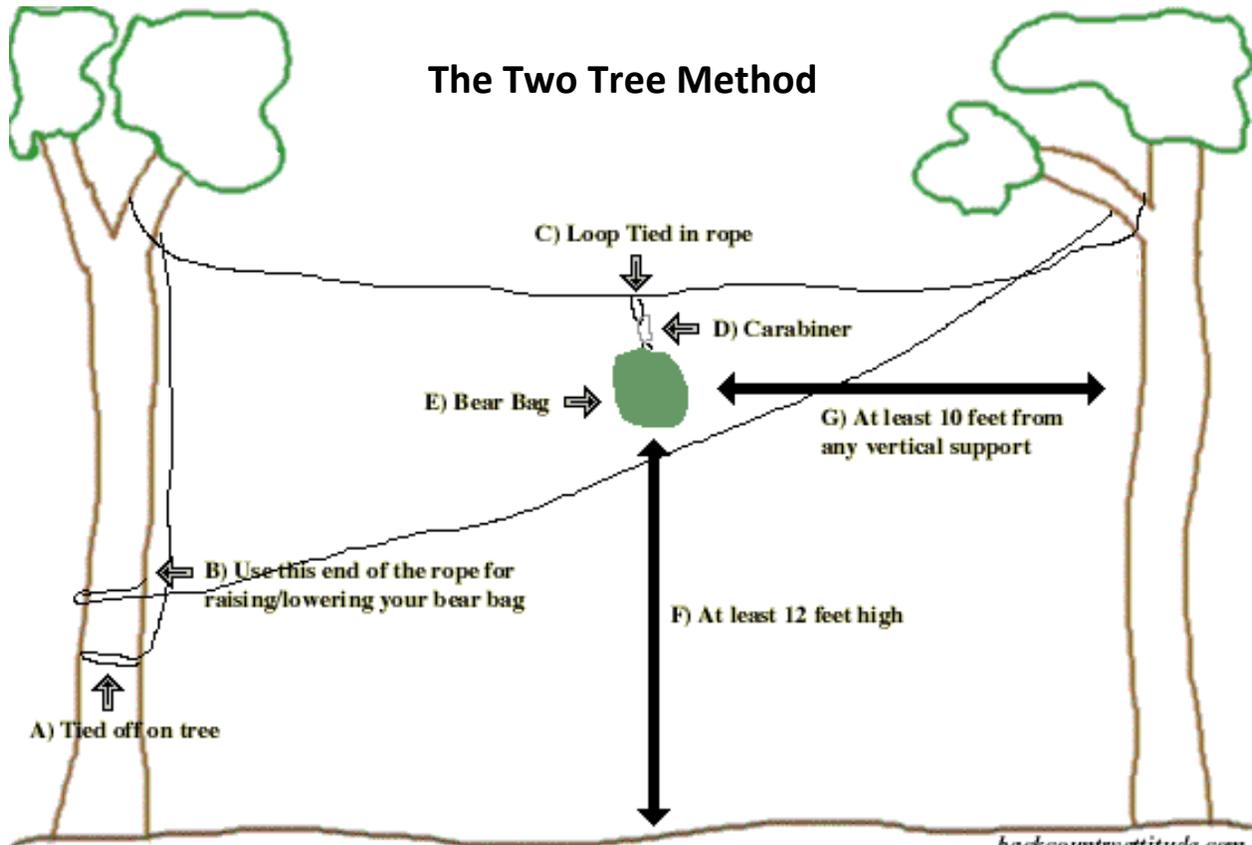


NOTE: When properly hung, the bear bag should hang at least 12 ft (4 m) above the ground and 6 ft (~2 m) down from the branch and away from the tree trunk.

(See <http://Int.org/blog/hanging-bear-bag>)



The Two Tree Method



Leave No Trace is an outdoor ethic that everyone has heard of. The common conception is to leave a place better than you found it (pack it in, pack it out), which is true but there is much more to Leave No Trace than that. There are seven common principles to Leave No Trace.

1. **Plan Ahead and Prepare:** Know what your trip is going to require and prepare for all scenarios. In trip preparation, this is the time to put together all items that are required for animal encounter prevention techniques such as bear bagging.
2. **Travel and Camp On Durable Surfaces:** This reduces your impact on the wildlife you are adventuring out to. It also keeps you away from animal homes that are off the trails. Be sure to camp at least 200 feet from any water source.
3. **Dispose of Waste Properly:** “Pack it in, Pack it out” applies here. Any trash you have should never be left on the trails or campsites. It will disrupt the ecosystem and animals are more likely to become curious and check it out. Human waste should be buried in a cathole at least 6 inches deep and 200 feet from a water source. (Some parks require human waste bags because waste cannot be properly broken down, be sure to check your location’s regulations.)
4. **Leave What You Find:** Preserve the environment by leaving rocks, plants and other natural objects as you found them. Avoid bringing non-native species into the area and don’t build structures where they’re not permitted.
5. **Minimize Campfire Impacts:** Campfires leave lasting impacts in the backcountry so use backcountry stoves for cooking. If a campfire is permitted, be sure to keep it small and monitor it at all times.
6. **Respect Wildlife:** Observe wildlife from a distance, do not try to approach animals or feed them. Feeding animals will make them return which can be dangerous as well as unhealthy for the animal’s diet. Be aware of the impact you’re making in an animal’s territory.
7. **Be Considerate of Other Visitors:** Respect other visitors on the trails and don’t make an impact on their outdoor experience. “Let nature’s sounds prevail.”

For more information on Leave No Trace principles visit: [<https://lnt.org/learn/7-principles>] Leave No Trace is important etiquette that if practiced, can create a better outdoor adventure for you and keep run-ins with large animals at a minimum.



Encounters:

While encounters with these animals can be rare, it is crucial to know how to handle situations where you might cross paths with a bear or cougar or wolf.

Bear Encounters:

- Identify yourself and stay calm in the event of seeing a bear. Talk even toned to let the bear know you are a human and not a threat. Never make high pitched sounds or sounds that mimic a bear, this can trigger an attack. Slowly waive your arms so it can recognize you are human. It may stand on its hind legs to get a better smell of you, most of the time this is curiosity and not a threat.
- Pick up all small children immediately.
- Hike in in groups, groups are generally nosier and will tip off a bear that humans are around before the humans realize it. Bears will often steer clear because they're intimidated by the group size.
- Make yourself as large as possible. Size is an intimidation factor and can keep a bear from getting closer. One easy way to do this is to get to higher ground.
- Do NOT drop your pack. A pack is an extra layer of protection and can ultimately be the barrier that saves you in case of an attack.
- If a bear is stationary move away slowly and sideways. You can keep an eye on the bear this way and avoid tripping from walking backwards. It's a non-threatening movement to bears. Do NOT run, but if a bear follows, stop and hold your ground.
- Do NOT climb a tree. This traps you and bears can climb trees.
- Leave the area and only return once you're certain the bear has moved away.
- Be aware if there are cubs. A mother bear is like any other mother and will do anything to protect her youth if she feels threatened.

Grizzly Bear Attacks:

- If attacked by a grizzly bear, do not run. Bears can easily outrun humans.
- Instead play dead. Lie flat on your stomach or on your side with your legs drawn up to your chest and your hands protecting the back of your neck.
- If the attack persists, fight back vigorously. Aim for the bear's face.

Black Bear Attacks:

- If attacked by a black bear, do not play dead.
- Run and try to escape the bear by finding a car or building or another secure place.
- If escape is not possible, fight back with any available object aiming for the face.



Bear Spray:

Bear spray is a type of pepper spray or capsicum deterrent that is used by people in the woods to deter aggressive bears. The key active ingredient in bear sprays is capsaicinoids.

- Bear spray is helpful in preventing attacks when humans encounter bears and is an effective deterrent of bears.
- Bear spray is negatively affected by wind, rain, temperature, and other factors.
- Remember: Pepper spray is not bear spray.
- There are informational videos on how to use bear spray. See this link for an example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XyyjbzrYHYI>
- Experts suggest that if a bear is charging, you use the spray when a bear is no less than 25 feet away (preferably more) and for at least 6 seconds (again, preferably more).



- Bear spray is meant to be a LAST DEFENCE. It is no substitute for vigilance and appropriate bear avoidance safety techniques, many of which are explained here. It is only meant to be used on charging or attacking bears.

Cougar Encounters:

More often than not, you'll never see a cougar in the wilderness. If you do, that doesn't mean that it will lead to an attack. Here are some things to keep in mind if you ever encounter a cougar.

- Cougars are more likely to attack lone hikers and kids under 16, so hike in groups when possible.
- Keep an eye out for signs of cougars in the area. Prints, droppings, and trees with claw marks are all indication of cougars in the area. Consider making a U-turn before you encounter one face to face.
- If you're hiking with a pet, keep it on a short leash and if there have been recent cougar sightings in the area, leave your pet at home.
- Like with bears, making a bit of noise to alert any cougars in the area to your presence. Chatting with your group, wearing bells, etc. can all help prevent an encounter.

- If you do come across a cougar, stay calm. Make sure the cougar isn't backed into a corner, which could cause it to attack when otherwise it wouldn't. Back up slowly, and try to look as large as possible. Do not run, they will see you as food.
- If the cougar leaves the area, leave the area immediately and don't return until you are sure the cat is gone.
- If the cougar follows you or acts aggressively, don't back down. Be loud, bear your teeth, and maintain eye contact. Keep making yourself as large as possible. The goal is to make the cougar see you as a threat, not prey. Do not turn your back on a cougar, as this encourages them to pounce.

Cougar Attacks:

Signs that a cougar is about to attack: intense staring, crouched position, twitching tail, erect ears.

- If a cougar attacks, use any weapon available. This can include a camera, binoculars, knives, fishing poles, or your fists. Aim for eyes, nose, ears, and face.

Wolf Encounters:

Wolves generally fear and actively avoid people, and rarely pose a threat to human safety. If you do encounter a wolf, remember these tips:

- Stay calm and do not run
- Stand tall and make yourself look larger
- Slowly back away and maintain eye contact
- Leave the wolf a way to escape
- Keep pets on short leashes
- Always hike/ camp in a group

Wolf Attacks:

- If a wolf approaches or acts aggressively, wave your arms and make yourself look bigger. Shout, make noise, and throw any objects around you.
- If you are attacked by a wolf, fight back. Try to remain standing and use any weapon available. Keep the animal away from your head and neck.

Other Animals:

Other animals found in the backcountry don't pose as much of a predatorial threat as bears, cougars, and wolves do but it is still important to be aware of them. Be cautious in an area with moose or elk, especially during mating season and in and around May, when cow moose have their calves. Unlike with large predators, if a moose charges you, run. Try and place trees inbetween you and the moose. The moose will eventually deem you at a safe distance away, and stop chasing you.



Resources:

<http://www.centerforwildlifeinformation.org/BeBearAware/BearSpray/bearspray.html>

http://www.mountaineersbooks.org/assets/clientpages/zz_cougairecounter.aspx

<https://www.outdoors.org/articles/amc-outdoors/responding-to-moose-encounters/>

- Bear bagging: video
 - o <http://www.backpacker.com/view/videos/skills-videos/learn-how-to-hang-a-bear-bag/> (two tree bear bagging and common mistakes)
 - o <http://www.backpacker.com/view/photos/skills-photos/how-to-hang-a-bear-bag-pct-style/#bp=0/img11> (PCT one tree bear bagging)
- Encounters: bear, cougar, wolf :links
 - o http://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/ipnf/learning/safety-ethics/?cid=fsm9_019033 (Bear encounters)
 - o <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/bears/safety.htm> (Bear encounters)
 - o http://www.mountaineersbooks.org/assets/clientpages/zz_cougairecounter.aspx (Cougar encounters)
 - o <http://westernwildlife.org/gray-wolf-outreach-project/wolf-saftey/> (Wolf encounters)
- ID'ing wild animals
 - o <http://geology.com/stories/13/bear-areas/> (Bear locations in North America)
 - o <http://westernwildlife.org/cougar-outreach-project/cougar-identification/> (Cougars)
 - o <http://wdfw.wa.gov/living/bobcats.html> (Bobcats)
 - o <http://westernwildlife.org/gray-wolf-outreach-project/library-2/> (Wolves)
- Bear Spraying: video
 - o <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XyyjbrYHYI>
 - o <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gJEnJnW68Mo> (Sabre training units)
- Leave No Trace:
 - o www.lnt.org