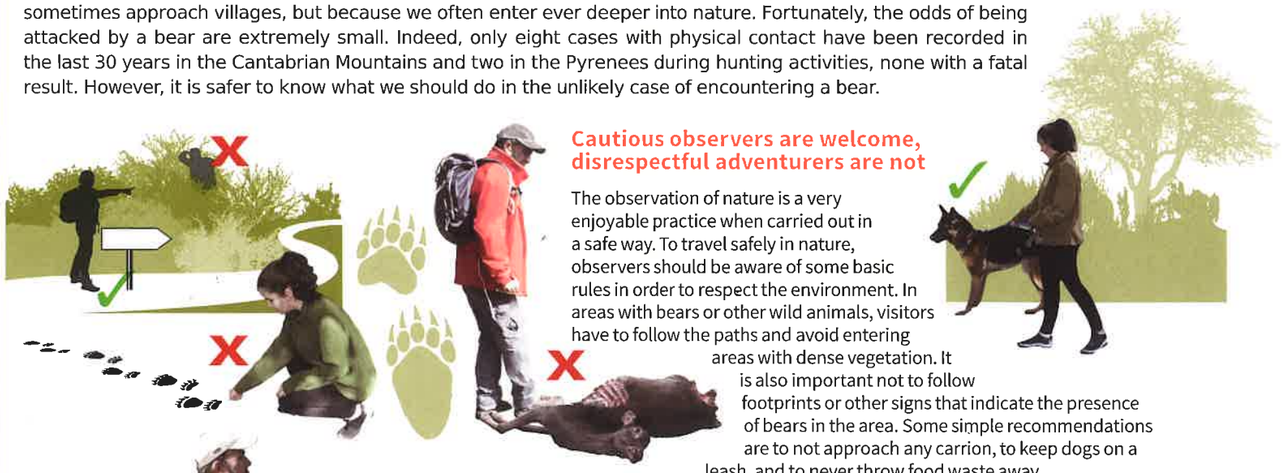
WHAT TO DO IF YOU ENCOUNTER A BEAR?

The Cantabrian brown bear population has greatly increased over recent years, which has subsequently increased the odds of encounters between bears and people. Such encounters take place not only because bears sometimes approach villages, but because we often enter ever deeper into nature. Fortunately, the odds of being attacked by a bear are extremely small. Indeed, only eight cases with physical contact have been recorded in the last 30 years in the Cantabrian Mountains and two in the Pyrenees during hunting activities, none with a fatal result. However, it is safer to know what we should do in the unlikely case of encountering a bear.



Cautious observers are welcome, disrespectful adventurers are not

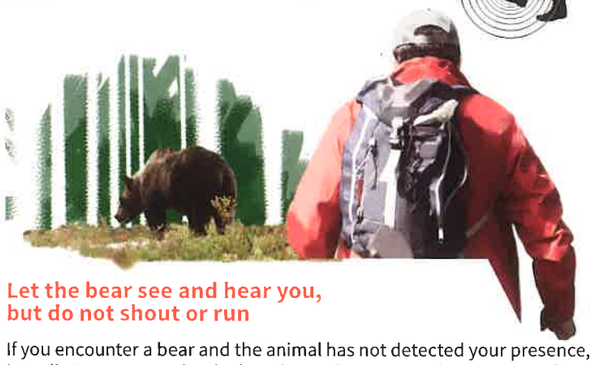
The observation of nature is a very enjoyable practice when carried out in a safe way. To travel safely in nature, observers should be aware of some basic rules in order to respect the environment. In areas with bears or other wild animals, visitors have to follow the paths and avoid entering areas with dense vegetation. It is also important not to follow footprints or other signs that indicate the presence of bears in the area. Some simple recommendations are to not approach any carrion, to keep dogs on a leash, and to never throw food waste away.

Bear avoids us. Do the same!

Bears are very elusive, which means that they avoid interacting with people. A bear's sense of smell is remarkable, and they can be aware of the presence of humans up to several kilometres away. However, sometimes bears do not realise that humans are approaching them. Bears are particularly dangerous when they are injured or when a female is with her cubs. In the hypothetical case of encountering a female with cubs, never get between them! Likewise, if a bear is pursued by dogs, is surprised in its den, or is eating carrion, the animal might adopt defensive behaviours. In all these cases: back off very slowly and stay silent.

Something very unusual: the bear attacks

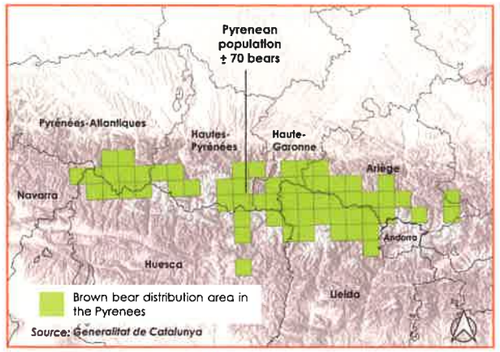
There are some bears that are more aggressive with people than others, such as the grizzly bear, but Cantabrian brown bears are rarely dangerous. However, in the unlikely case of an attack, one should lie face down or adopt the foetal position at the same time as protecting your head and face with your hands and arms and remain immobile.



Let the bear see and hear you, but do not shout or run

If you encounter a bear and the animal has not detected your presence, it is really important to let the bear know that you are there. Move softly and speak in a low but assertive voice. These small actions will probably make the bear change its route. We have to avoid provoking the bear into thinking that we are a danger, so we should not run, shout or threaten the animal.

● Standing up on its hind legs does not necessarily denote an aggressive attitude, but an attempt to identify us.



Left: brown bear distribution areas in the Pyrenees and the Cantabrian Mountains

If a bear runs toward us, are we in danger?

In the unlikely case that the bear feels threatened, it could charge. At that moment you should remain calm, speak softly and avoid moving in an intimidating way. Back off calmly, while keeping visual contact with the bear.

Enjoy the bears… at a distance

To watch a female bear with her cubs or a male feeding on the fruits of a tree from the opposite slope of a valley (i.e., a couple of hundred metres away) it is a great achievement for wildlife watchers. It is strongly recommended that people go bear watching with an official guide.

Danger, there is a bear in the road!

This is not a likely situation to be encountered, but in the case that you encounter a bear running along a road, never chase the bear with the vehicle to get closer to the animal. Instead, stop the vehicle or reduce the speed as much as possible, and wait until the bear has left the road. In all cases, turn on the vehicle's emergency lights.

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