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Dog Training Protocols That Could Save Your Dog's Life



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Hiking off-leash with our dogs has been a daily part of our lives for many years, but now that we live in bear country there is a need to take extra safety precautions. We need to instill some unique training protocols in order to safely and respectfully co-exist with these beautiful animals. Although bear attacks are rare, statistics show that the risk increases when hiking with off-leash dogs.

Bear Spray – Too Close For Comfort

Bear repellent spray is definitely something we carry on our hikes however, we're firm believers that if you need to use bear spray, things have gone awry and the bear is way too close. Bear spray is an excellent deterrent to have on hand but it's even better if you never have to use it. And bear spray alone isn't much of a safety plan.

Bear Bells – How To Make A Racket 101

Black bears are quite timid by nature and are easily scared away. That's why the single best thing you can do to prevent a bear-encounter is to make a cacophony of noise as you travel through the trails of the forest. Every dog and person in our pack wears a bear bell. These bells emit a very unnatural sound that warns bears and other animals well in advance that we're coming through. It gives them plenty of warning and if they have young, they can move them out of harm's way. Un-habituated bears will almost always avoid humans if given the opportunity and

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offensive bear attacks are extremely rare. In fact, only 67 people have been attacked by black bears in Canada since the year 1900 and the odds that you'll be murdered by a person is 60,000 times greater. R1

Air Horns – The Bear Runs Away, The Dogs Come Back

There are two things you would like to occur simultaneously when you're out with your dogs and you spot a bear. You want the bear to run away and you want your dogs run to you – you do not want your dogs to chase the bear. Untrained dogs are the cause of many bear incidences involving humans. A wise old bushman once told Greg that a well-trained dog will keep bears away while a poorly trained dog will lead them back to you. He also told him that one of the best bear repellents you can use in the woods is an air horn. As previously mentioned, bears are generally timid creatures and the very loud, obnoxious blast of an air horn is usually quite effective at chasing them away. Greg experienced this firsthand when he encountered a four hundred pound black bear on his northern bush property, but that's a tale for another day. In lieu of all this, we have developed what we call our Bear Horn Recall Training Protocol.

As you can see in the video, our dogs have been conditioned so that when they hear the air horn, they immediately run to us and hopefully, the bear becomes startled and runs away. It may be simple in theory but when teaching this protocol, there are some very specific criteria that must be followed. To view the video click here; <http://www.dogtrainingcareers.com/dog-blog>

1. First and foremost, your dogs should be well trained in secured, distracting environments before testing their skills in unsecured or potentially dangerous habitats.
2. Then you need to desensitize your dogs to the sound of the air horn while creating the most incredible cause and effect association possible. Start with short, low-volume toots while your dogs are fairly close in a safe and controlled environment. When they turn to look at you, call them to you and give them a very special treat or other highly valued resource. You don't want to scare your dogs with the air horn so start with low volume and intensity and gradually build up to a long, full volume blast once they're desensitized, conditioned and are further away from you. It's just as important to get your dogs accustomed to blasts in close proximity in case one of your dogs is near you when you see a bear.
3. Your treats must be exciting enough to motivate your dogs away from major distractions. Use a potent resource that is unique to this protocol. In other words,

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use a very high valued treat that your dogs don't get at any other time, something with a ton of flavour and aroma such as a sizeable piece of meat, fish or salmon cake. A low valued treat or cookie won't cut it.

4. Begin with low distractions and call your dogs in with the air horn while hiking. As you achieve repeated success, call your dogs when there is just a bit more distraction, then, gradually increase the level of distraction. The idea is that with successful repetitions, coming in quickly for a wonderful treat becomes a habit, to the point where the dog is conditioned to quickly recall without thinking about it, because making a choice could lead to disaster.

5. Once your dogs return to you, require them to sit and focus on you before rewarding then releasing them. This is important for two reasons. The first is to prevent your dogs from focusing on the bear and running off, and the second is because in a dangerous situation, you may need to get your dogs on leash and vacate the area quickly. This is much easier to accomplish if your dogs are under control.

5. Once you have a solid air horn recall and sit, practice on a regular basis. As with all dog training protocols, you need to put the reps in. We hike with our dogs at least once a day and make a point of practicing at least one air horn recall per hike whether or not it's bear season, in order to maintain a polished response. This is because there could be other situations where a quick recall is crucial to the safety of you and/or your dogs. The air horn recall can also prevent unfortunate encounters with other potentially dangerous animals including: porcupines, fisher weasels, coyotes, wolves and moose or even unexpected snowmobiles or ATVs. This is a training protocol that you want as close to 100% reliable as humanly possible.

As a benevolent leader hiking your pack off leash, your three priorities should be for your own safety, the safety of your dogs and the safety of the indigenous wildlife. Hiking your dogs off leash in bear country is about weighing risk versus reward. Although the risk is real it is very low, and to us, the rewards far outweigh the risks, but it is our responsibility to do everything possible to tip the odds in our favour. That said – everyone has to accept the risks that are within his or her own comfort level.

One thing Mother Nature has taught us time and again is that if we go head to head with her, it's not likely to end well for us, our dogs and/or the wildlife we encounter. In the end, it's always wise and prudent to respect Mother Nature and all of her creatures – big and small.

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References

R1 – <http://wiseaboutbears.org/about-us/bear-attacks-2/>