

Oku-Nikko Bear Information

Bears in Japan and Oku-Nikko

Oku-Nikko is home to the Asian black bear (*Ursus thibetanus*), and bears are often sighted here. Asian black bears are found on Honshu, the main island of Japan, and the island of Shikoku.

Characteristics and Behavior

Asian black bears are medium-sized, almost completely black except for a white crescent-shape on the chest. Fully grown adults can reach 110 to 130cm in size, and 40 to 130kg in weight. They are agile tree climbers, and can run at speeds of 40 to 50km per hour, much faster than humans. Asian black bears are omnivores. Their diet consists mostly of plants, supplemented with animal carcasses and bees.

In Oku-Nikko, bears are known to be most active in the early morning and at night, as well as on rainy, foggy, or hazy days. In the spring and autumn, they forage during the day. Winter hibernation is from around December to April in Oku-Nikko, although the bears can wake if startled.

Evidence of Bear Activity

Evidence of the presence of the bears in Oku-Nikko includes claw marks on trees, stripped tree bark (*kumahagi* in Japanese), broken branches on trees where bears have foraged for food (*kumadana* in Japanese), footprints, and feces.

Bear Safety and Essential Precautions

Visitors should check bear sighting reports in advance. Be cautious during the early morning and early evening hours, and in rainy, foggy, or hazy weather, when these bears are known to be most active. Do not leave uneaten food, food waste, or cans around, as this may attract bears.

What to Do If You Encounter a Bear

Encountering bears is dangerous for both visitors and the bear. The bear will feel fear just as you do. Under all circumstances, it is important to remain calm and do your best not to startle or excite the bear.

1. Do Not Startle the Bear

Do not startle the bear with sudden noises, running away, taking photos, or flashing a flashlight. Be as quiet as possible.

2. Leave the Scene

The best way to avoid danger is to quietly leave the scene immediately, but without running, as this may startle the bear. If you are close to the bear, do not turn your back to it, but move away backward, slowly.

3. Hide and Protect Your Neck and Head

If you are unable to leave the scene, try to hide behind a big rock or fallen tree. Protect your neck and head with your arms and curl up into a ball facing the ground. As these bears can run at 40 to 50km per hour, can climb trees, and swim, we humans are not fast enough to outrun them.

4. Keep Well Away from Bear Cubs

Bear cubs are adorable, but the mother is always nearby and will aggressively protect her cubs. Leave the scene quietly if you encounter bear cubs.

The Role of Bears in Oku-Nikko

The bear population of Oku-Nikko plays an important part in the ecosystem here. Bear sightings are not uncommon, although there have been extremely few incidents resulting in human injury. Even so, visitors are strongly recommended always to take precautions to protect themselves and to respect the presence of the bears, so that bears and humans can peacefully coexist.