



Arctic

National Wildlife Refuge

Best Practices for Polar Bear Viewing

Hire an authorized business when viewing polar bears from the water

If you view polar bears from the water or use a water taxi service, hire an authorized business with registered boat operators and staff. They have participated in polar bear guide workshops and have the safety training—and knowledge of conservation laws and scientific studies—to provide professional, quality polar bear viewing opportunities. These guides are required to operate and maintain their boats and equipment to professional standards.

Arctic Refuge lists authorized businesses at <http://arctic.fws.gov/pbguide.htm>.

Legal boat operators keep a copy of their Arctic Refuge business permit on their boat. The permit also lists the name of the business's Coast Guard-licensed boat operator(s). If you request, legal boat operators will show you documentation that their business is authorized. They have worked hard to maintain this authorization.

How is Arctic Refuge involved?

The Refuge is required to oversee commercial activities on the water and Refuge lands surrounding Kaktovik to protect wildlife habitat and subsistence opportunities for local residents.

Arctic Refuge and its partners provide technical assistance and training opportunities for businesses and boat operators. To find out more contact Jennifer Reed at Arctic Refuge: (907) 455-1835, or jennifer_reed@fws.gov.

Though polar bears may appear tame, these animals are wild and their behavior can change quickly. Viewing polar bears in the wild is an inherently dangerous activity.

By law, polar bear viewing is dependent on avoiding disturbance to bears. You have an opportunity to view polar bears because people before you used responsible and safe viewing practices. Polar bear viewing will only continue if you and other viewers are careful to keep polar bears and people safe.

Each polar bear's reactions to people vary depending on the bear itself, the viewing circumstances, and other factors. For example, one bear may tolerate viewers within 100 feet while another may leave the area when approached at 500 feet. Bears are also more likely to react to a noisy, quickly-approaching vehicle or boat than to one approaching slowly with minimal lights and noise.

Here's what you can do . . .

Follow these guidelines to ensure you have the least impact on polar bears

Before you view:

- Review the Polar Bear Viewing Information booklet with your guide
- Review your guide's safety plan to find out what to do if an emergency arises (for example a vehicle breakdown)
- Know appropriate responses if a bear approaches you in a curious, nervous, threatening, or aggressive manner
- Become familiar with wildlife alarm signals (listed in the Polar Bear Viewing Information booklet) and avoid acting in ways that stress bears

When you view:

- Arrive and leave viewing areas using the same route, proceeding slowly, with minimal lights and noise
- Always stay within earshot of your guide
- Avoid noisy conversations and sudden movements during viewing
- Use extra caution if viewing during low light conditions (one way, for example, is to have a dedicated observer watching for bears from all directions)
- Remain in your vehicle or boat unless instructed by your guide

Make sure you:

- Do not herd, follow, chase, or displace bears
- Do not attract bears with food, scents, sounds, etc.
- Do not allow physical contact between a bear and a vehicle or boat
- Never separate a mother from her cubs
- Never restrict the movements of swimming bears
- Obey all local signs, barriers, guidelines, ordinances etc. regarding bear viewing practices

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Frequently asked questions

How close is “too close” to polar bears?

- There is no legally set distance for polar bear viewing. Instead, **guides and viewers are expected to view bears in a manner that avoids disturbing them.** Each bear's reaction to humans is dependent on that bear's individual tolerance and viewer's actions.
- You are required to immediately stop your approach if a bear responds to your presence. If it continues to show signs of disturbance you must retreat.
- Viewing polar bears safely and legally requires an in-depth understanding of bear behavior. This is why you should hire guides committed to professional standards for quality polar bear viewing.

Whose job is it to decide how we view bears: the guide's or the viewer's?

- It is your guide's responsibility to choose actions that help protect both you and bears. Respect your guide's decisions. However, it is also your responsibility, as viewer, to act respectfully and legally toward polar bears, whether you are using a guide or not.

Why are some activities allowed that disturb bears, but bear viewing is so carefully monitored?

- The Endangered Species Act and Marine Mammal Protection Act allow for certain types of disturbance (called “take”) such as for subsistence hunting, scientific research, and human safety activities. All of those instances require the hunter, researcher, or manager to minimize and report the disturbance. There is no such exception for recreational polar bear viewing, which means that it can continue only if it is done in a way that does not disturb polar bears.

Why are people allowed to hunt polar bears even though the bears are threatened?

- Polar bears were listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act because of sea ice habitat loss, not because of subsistence hunting.
- The Endangered Species Act and Marine Mammal Protection Act provide for subsistence opportunities that allow Native coastal-dwelling peoples to hunt polar bears, recognizing this traditional use and its cultural importance. The Marine Mammal Protection Act also designates a number of Alaska Native co-management partners for polar bear conservation. Their involvement helps ensure a responsible harvest.
- The North Slope Inupiat and Canadian Inuvialuit peoples have a voluntary agreement to harvest polar bears in a responsible manner.

Do commercial photographers need a special permit?

- In most cases, yes. See the Polar Bear Viewing Information booklet for detailed information about commercial photography of polar bears. Requirements may vary depending on where and how the activity occurs.

What should I do if I see a bear in town?

- Move to safety and then call 911 to report the location of the bear.

The Arctic Refuge coast is unique because of its polar bear viewing opportunities and the role citizens play in polar bear conservation.

You have the chance to view polar bears because of the efforts of people before you to use safe viewing practices. Please do your part by following best practices when viewing polar bears.

Polar Bears (USFWS)

