

# BEAR SPRAY (AKA WILDLIFE SPRAY): A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR USE IN COUGAR COUNTRY & BEYOND

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**Wildlife spray**—commonly labeled as **bear spray**—is a powerful, non-lethal tool that can stop large mammals in their tracks. It contains *capsaicin*, a natural chemical found in chili peppers, which creates an intense but temporary cloud of irritation that affects the eyes, nose, and lungs. Though the name says “bear,” this spray works on many wildlife species.

## What kinds of animals is wildlife spray effective against?

When used correctly, wildlife spray can deter species such as:

- Cougars
- Black bears
- Grizzly bears
- Coyotes
- Wolves
- Bobcats
- Moose
- Elk
- Deer
- Mountain goats
- Bighorn sheep
- Even domestic dogs

This tool is useful in neighborhoods, on trails, or during any outdoor activity in areas where wildlife may be present. **But it's only effective if you're prepared to use it properly.**

## Choosing the Right Spray

Not all sprays are equal—and not all are safe or legal for wildlife defense. Look for a product that is:

- Clearly labeled as Bear Spray or Wildlife Spray (not “pepper spray” or “repellent”)
- Has a spray range of at least 20–30 feet
- Offers at least 7 seconds of spray duration or contains 7.9 oz (225 g) of product
- Contains 1–2% capsaicin (the active irritant)
- Read the back of the can thoroughly—every manufacturer’s instructions are slightly different. Note that bear spray cannot be flown in checked or carry-on bags and is disallowed in some parks/ locations; plan your purchase or rental accordingly.

## Practice Before You Need It

Carrying spray isn’t enough—you have to know how to use it. Use an **inert** (practice) **canister** to rehearse the steps: drawing from your holster, removing the safety clip, aiming, and spraying. Practice outdoors in a safe, open space.

## Accessibility is Key

In an emergency, seconds matter. Keep your spray on your body, not buried in your pack. Hip, chest, or shoulder holsters are all good options. Practice drawing it quickly, and make sure all adults and responsible teens carry their own canister. Bear spray is not appropriate for small children.

## Using Wildlife Spray in the Field

If an animal is approaching and shows signs of escalating interest:

1. Grip the can firmly like a coffee mug, thumb resting on the safety clip.
2. Slide the safety clip off with your thumb.
3. Aim slightly downward toward the animal’s face or chest—adjusting for height and species.
4. When the animal is within 30–60 ft, spray short bursts, each about 1–2 seconds, until the animal turns away. You’re not aiming for precision—just create a wall of pepper mist between you and the animal.
5. Mind the wind. Position your body to avoid blowback.
6. Once the animal leaves, exit the area calmly but promptly.

## Storage & Replacement

Store spray in a cool, dry place—not in a hot car, and out of reach of kids or pets. Heat can cause the can to rupture, and extreme cold can reduce pressure.

Replace your spray if:

- It’s been discharged
- It’s past the expiration date
- It was exposed to extreme temperatures (check the can for specific limits)

**Wildlife spray is not for everyone—but for those who choose to carry it, it’s a critical part of a broader wildlife safety strategy. It’s a last resort tool that can save lives—yours and the animal’s.**



Helping Communities  
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# AIR HORNS:

## A SIMPLE, EFFECTIVE TOOL FOR THE TRAIL & AT HOME



**Air horns** are a powerful, easy-to-use non-lethal tool that can startle and deter wildlife—including cougars—before an encounter escalates. They work by producing a loud, sudden sound that animals may find unpleasant and will typically avoid. Think of air horns as your early deterrent system: loud, safe, and simple.

### Why Carry an Air Horn?

Unlike bear spray, which is designed to stop an animal that is already approaching, air horns can be used *preemptively*—to discourage an animal from coming closer, or to encourage it to leave the area. They're a great option for anyone, especially those who might not be comfortable using bear spray.

### Two Main Types

There are two kinds of air horns you'll commonly find: disposable and reusable.

- **Disposable air horns** use compressed gas to create sound. They're the loudest option and are typically used in marine or safety settings. However, because of their volume, they are not recommended for use by children. They should also be handled carefully to avoid accidental discharge, which can damage hearing. These horns are single-use—once the can is empty, it needs to be replaced. *See image 1.*
- **Reusable air horns** are available as a rechargeable canister style or powered by your breath.
  - Rechargeable air horns are as loud as disposable horns and come with the same precautions.
  - Breath powered air horns are quieter than disposable or rechargeable versions but can still be effective. *See image 2.*

### Access, Storage, & Replacement

As with bear spray, **accessibility** matters. Store your air horn in a place you can reach quickly—in a holster on your chest, backpack strap, runners vest, etc. Before each outing, **test reusable air horns** to make sure they working properly. Latex-based horns can degrade over time, so keep them in a cool, shaded place (a plastic bag helps) when not in use.

### Using the Horn in the Field

When you see a cougar, get big and get loud. That's a good time to use your air horn.

**For disposable air horns:** Hold the horn at arm's length, with the cone facing the direction of the animal (and away from your ears). One or two sharp blasts are usually enough to startle a curious cougar or to interrupt its focus.

Remember: the goal is to discourage further interest.

### Considerations

#### **For disposable horns:**

- Read the label for safety and storage instructions. Many horns come with a safety tab to prevent accidental discharge—know how to remove it quickly.
- Carry a backup can if you're relying on a disposable model.

Don't rely solely on an air horn—combine it with good awareness, group travel, and clear sightlines.

**Whether you're hiking, camping, in your backyard in cougar country, or just out for a walk near your home, air horns are a great addition to your wildlife safety gear.** They're easy to use, the reusable air horns can be kid-friendly (when appropriate), and support a proactive approach to safe coexistence.



A male cougar's golden eyes are illuminated by the setting sun over the San Gabriel Mountain range. © Johanna Turner/ Cougarmagic