

As I round the corner, I spy a bear cub just to the right of the trail. I know it's

only a taxidermy mount—carefully nestled into position among the ponderosa pines—but in my mind I pretend it's alive: Has it seen me? Should I back away slowly? Run while it isn't looking? Where is the mom?

These are questions several Girl Scouts waiting nearby are hoping I will ask. And they have answers.

The Scouts, stationed along this wildlife safety trail, are teaching me and the 7- to 9-year-old students I am with how to avoid conflicts with wildlife. "Is this a grizzly or a black bear cub?" one student asks. A Scout

logs and rocks, where rattlesnakes sometimes hide. As long as people leave snakes alone, she says, they pose no danger. These and other simulated encounters help students learn to avoid conflicts with real wildlife.

It's not often you run into high-schoolers teaching grade-school students how to be safe around grizzly bears, poisonous snakes, and other potentially dangerous wildlife. Chuck Bartlebaugh hopes it becomes commonplace. Bartlebaugh is director of the Missoula-based Center for Wildlife Information (CWI). He created the Be Bear Aware and Wildlife Stewardship Campaign, which spreads information across North America on how to safely live and recreate in areas where bears and other wildlife live.

One tool in the campaign is the portable wildlife safety trail, which can be set up either indoors or outdoors. The trail is part of Bartlebaugh's innovative Train the Trainer Program, which teaches people to instruct others about wildlife safety. "There's no way a nonprofit like ours, or public agencies like Fish, Wildlife & Parks, could ever have enough staff to reach all the people out there who want to learn about wildlife safety," Bartlebaugh says. "So we provide adults and young adults like Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts with training and presentation skills so they can teach younger people in schools and clubs the right ways to avoid conflicts with wildlife. It leverages the knowledge and teaching techniques we've developed to reach many more people."

Bartlebaugh adds that kids who take part in the wildlife safety trail are encouraged to share what they learn with friends and family members. "The trail is a tangible way to learn about living with wildlife and then pass the message on to others," he says.

Government conservation agencies and wildlife-related nonprofits such as FWP, the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee, the

explains how to tell the difference: Grizzlies have a dish-shaped face profile, humped shoulders, and small, rounded ears. Do not rely on color or size, she explains. Black bears can be brown, and grizzlies sometimes appear black. Young grizzlies can be smaller than adult black bears.

A few minutes later, along the same trail, students encounter "fresh" mountain lion tracks in mud and a "rattlesnake" hidden under a log. One Scout explains that lion tracks indicate the animal may be nearby and the group needs to keep an eye out and stay close together. Another Scout tells the children to be careful when stepping over

Vivaca Crowser manages the FWP regional Information and Education Program in Missoula.

BE PREPARED (for Wildlife Encounters)

Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, and others teach youngsters how to avoid conflicts with bears, cougars, and other wild animals.

BY VIVACA CROWSER



BEAR-B-GONE Girl Scouts give tips on using bear spray along an educational wildlife safety trail created by the Missoula-based Center for Wildlife Information.

Great Bear Foundation, Safari Club International, Wildlife Forever, Defenders of Wildlife, and the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation helped fund the wildlife safety and stewardship campaign.

Bartlebaugh says public interest in wildlife safety is growing as more and more people move into Montana and build homes in what was previously wildlife habitat. "Many new residents are from cities and don't know how to coexist with large wildlife such as bears," he says.

Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts have been ideal for delivering wildlife safety messages to others, says Jim Atkinson, a board member with the Montana Council for Boy Scouts of America. "Older Scouts communicate the message well to their peers and younger school groups. And their efforts can help them earn merit badges and achieve leadership positions," he says.

In response to growing public demand for information on wildlife safety, the Scouts worked with the CWI and FWP to create a "traveling classroom." It's a trailer filled with props—wildlife mounts, skulls, tracks, camping gear, wildlife-resistant food storage

boxes—used for the wildlife safety trail. The trailer also houses stand-up displays, brochures, and other educational tools. Shawnee Allison, a Girl Scout in Missoula, helped create the traveling classroom by developing a list of educational contents and then finding a trailer to store the items. "I wanted something that would make it easier for the wildlife safety message to reach more people in more places," Allison says. Funding and wildlife mounts came from FWP, The Pittsburgh Foundation, and the United Taxidermy Association. For her contribution to the project, Allison received a Gold Award—the Girl Scouts' highest honor.

Bartlebaugh says the trailer has been an effective way to deliver wildlife awareness messages to communities across western Montana. He has met with various wildlife agencies and organizations in Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, and Washington to discuss how they might fund additional trailers. "People all over the West want information on how to live peacefully with bears and other wildlife," he says. "Trailers like this are a great way to take that information to fairs and other places where people gather." 🐻



MEMORABLE ENCOUNTER Children inspect a black bear mount on the wildlife safety trail while learning how to avoid dangerous encounters. Below: Girl Scouts set up an information display transported in a new education trailer.

