

Bear Incidents in the United States

The following is a partial listing of incidents involving captive bears in the United States since 1990. These incidents have resulted in six human deaths, 29 bear deaths, and over 65 human injuries. Contact PETA for documentation.

February 23, 2023/St. Louis, Missouri: Ben, an Andean bear, escaped for a second time in one month at the Saint Louis Zoo. (See the February 7, 2023, entry.) The escape occurred during open hours for the zoo, requiring an emergency closure. Staff were able to tranquilize Ben and return him to an enclosure after approximately 50 minutes.

February 7, 2023/St. Louis, Missouri: Ben, an Andean bear, was found outside his enclosure at the Saint Louis Zoo before it opened to the public. The zoo stated that he had meddled with steel mesh in his outdoor enclosure, causing a cable to give way, which allowed him to escape. It took staff nearly two hours to tranquilize and recapture him.

December 21, 2022/Jacksonville, Florida: An animal keeper was attacked by Johnny, a black bear, at the Jacksonville Zoo. The keeper told reporters that she had left a gate open by mistake and that when she went to check on what sounded like bears fighting, she found that Johnny had escaped. He then ran toward her, knocked her to the ground, and started to drag her toward the den house. Four rounds from a 12-gauge shotgun were fired into his head, chest, and back. Johnny then ran to the back of the enclosure, where he collapsed

and died. The keeper required treatment for lacerations on her head, back, and thighs.

November 15, 2022/Locust Grove, Georgia: Tuffy, a black bear, bit the hand of an employee at Noah's Ark. The newly hired employee had tried to administer medication by hiding it in food and proceeded to feed it to Tuffy straight out of her hand, which resulted in a significant injury that required hospitalization. The employee reportedly stated that she had never administered the medication before and hadn't been trained on proper safety procedures for doing so.

November 16, 2019/Farmington, Pennsylvania: An employee was airlifted to a trauma center after being injured by a Himalayan bear at Nemaquin Woodlands Resort. The bear reached through a fence, pulled the worker in, and bit his or her arm.

April 12, 2019/Newberry, Michigan: Two yearling black bears escaped an enclosure during a power outage at Oswald's Bear Ranch. One animal was tranquilized and returned to the enclosure. The second, named Sophie, was shot and killed by the local sheriff approximately half a mile away after being at large for days.

January 25, 2019/Denver, Colorado: A grizzly bear at the Denver Zoo bit an employee's finger. He was taken to the hospital for treatment.

January 18, 2019/Baltimore, Maryland: Two young polar bears managed to enter a keeper work area at the Maryland Zoo. Staff were able to secure the bears in an outdoor habitat approximately 40 minutes later.

June 21, 2018/Milwaukee, Wisconsin: The Milwaukee County Zoo was on lockdown and visitors were moved to secure buildings for a half-hour after two grizzly bears escaped from a primary enclosure and entered a secondary containment area.

July 21, 2017/Ballston Spa, New York:

During a performance at the Saratoga County Fair, a young grizzly bear being exhibited by A Grizzly Experience clawed the handler in front of a live audience. The handler held his face as blood streamed from it and walked the braying bear back to the trailer. The remainder of the show was canceled.

June 25, 2016/Columbus, Ohio: Joanie, a 7-month-old black bear, scaled an electric fence at the Columbus Zoo and was able to escape from the enclosure that she was kept in. She was sedated with a dart and returned to the bear habitat about 15 minutes later.

May 21, 2016/Minot, North Dakota: Two drunken men broke into the Roosevelt Park Zoo and taunted the bears. One of the men stuck his arm through the fencing of an enclosure, and a bear bit his hand. He was hospitalized for the injury.

May 19, 2016/Newberry, Michigan: A houseguest was scratched by a bear cub from Oswald's Bear Ranch. The cub was being cared for at the Oswalds' private residence when the incident occurred. The wound was treated after it became infected two days later.

March 16, 2016/Cincinnati, Ohio: Two polar bears escaped from the primary enclosure that they were being held in at the Cincinnati Zoo, causing the zoo to go on lockdown for nearly two hours.

February 21, 2016/Greenville, Wisconsin: An employee at Special Memories Zoo required stitches after being bitten on the hand by a black bear. The employee was trying to lure a bear out of a den after the animal had awakened from hibernation so that she could put fresh food inside. She failed to notice that the other bear sharing the enclosure had come up on the other

side trying to get at the food, and she was bitten.

August 4, 2014/Brownsville, Texas: A young black bear named Oscar managed to climb out of the bear exhibit at the Gladys Porter Zoo. He startled visitors as he foraged for snacks in the park's trash cans. The zoo was on lockdown until he could be returned to an enclosure.

April 27, 2014/Melrose, Florida: A member of the public who was allowed to hold a bear cub at Single Vision sustained a bite that broke the skin.

April 27, 2014/St. Louis, Missouri: A 3-month-old bear cub bit 14 Washington University in St. Louis students. The cub had been taken to the campus as part of a petting zoo owned by Cindy Farmer called Cindy's Zoo. The bear was transferred to the Saint Louis Zoo for a 30-day observation.

April 29, 2013/Bozeman, Montana: The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) cited Animals of Montana for a "serious" violation of federal law for allowing a 24-year-old employee to have direct contact with two grizzly bears while cleaning their enclosure, resulting in the keeper's mauling death. (See the entry titled "November 5, 2012/Bozeman, Montana.") OSHA proposed that Animals of Montana pay a \$9,000 penalty and install holding areas to separate the bears from employees during cleaning.

January 15, 2013/Naples, Florida: A male brown bear named Boo Boo escaped from an enclosure at A Grizzly Experience. He was recaptured three days later several blocks from the facility.

November 5, 2012/Bozeman, Montana: A 24-year-old employee at Animals of Montana was mauled to death while

cleaning a grizzly bear enclosure. One bear was shot and killed in order to retrieve the body.

June 21, 2012/Duluth, Minnesota: Berlin, a polar bear, escaped from an enclosure at the Lake Superior Zoo when Duluth experienced a flash flood. She was later tranquilized and quarantined at the zoo. Two seals had also escaped and were also recaptured.

October 19, 2011/Zanesville, Ohio: Six black bears and two grizzlies were shot and killed by police after they were let loose from an animal compound by the owner who had then shot and killed himself.

March 13, 2011/San Diego, California: A giant panda named Bai Yun pushed open a gate at the San Diego Zoo and bit a zookeeper. The zookeeper was treated at a hospital after the incident.

December 17, 2010/Columbia Station, Ohio: After a man was mauled to death by an adult black bear as he fed the animal at the private menagerie of Sam Mazzola (see the entry titled, "August 19, 2010/Columbia Station, Ohio"), the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) issued a letter to Mazzola officially notifying him that he should take steps to strictly prohibit "free contact" (a management system in which the keeper shares the same space as the bear without any physical barriers) and implement "protected contact" (a system in which humans and bears are always separated by protective barriers in the bears' space).

August 19, 2010/Columbia Station, Ohio: A 24-year-old man was attacked and severely mauled by an adult black bear when he was near the animal at the private menagerie of Sam Mazzola. The man was flown to a medical center, where he died the next morning.

July 21, 2010/Cherokee, North Carolina: A 9-year-old girl was bitten by a bear at Chief Saunooke Bear Park. The child sustained scratches on her palm and the back of her hand and tooth marks near her wrist bone. This was the second documented bite by a bear at the park in the span of a week and at least the third incident in the past eight months. (See the entry titled "December 7, 2009/Cherokee, North Carolina.")

July 2010/Mulberry Grove, Illinois: A worker at the menagerie of Gregg and Karen Woody was bitten on the side of the breast by a bear. As she walked past the enclosure, the bear reached her head through a feeding slot and bit the woman, who was treated at a hospital.

April 22, 2010/Sandstone, Minnesota: During a local school outing at the Minnesota Wildlife Connection, students and school employees were allowed to feed an approximately 19-year-old bear gummy bears by putting the candy in their mouths and letting the bear take it. Two people were bitten, and one of the victims was hospitalized for five days and had to receive a prophylactic series of inoculations for rabies.

December 7, 2009/Cherokee, North Carolina: A 75-year-old caretaker at Chief Saunooke Bear Park was attacked by a bear as she was giving the animals water. An Asian black bear bit the woman's hand and wrist and wouldn't let go. As a coworker physically pulled the woman's arm out of the enclosure and through the cage bars, the skin on the woman's forearm was severely abraded and sustained a "degloving-like injury." The woman also sustained skin lacerations near her mouth and hairline. The victim was airlifted to a hospital for treatment and remained hospitalized nine days later.

October 4, 2009/Saylorsburg, Pennsylvania: Kelly Ann Walz was attacked and killed by her 350-pound “pet” black bear while she was cleaning the cage. A neighbor shot and killed the bear as the animal was about to leave the cage. The victim’s two young children and the neighbor’s children witnessed the attack. Walz was pronounced dead at the scene.

November 24, 2008/Marengo, Ohio: A 300- to 400-pound “pet” black bear escaped the enclosure in which the animal was being kept and went to the home of a neighbor, who encountered the bear on his porch. When the bear’s owner, Harry Wilson, came to retrieve the bear, the animal reared up and charged him. Wilson shot the bear with a .22-caliber rifle. The bear was hit above the eye and fled into the woods. Deputies and an Ohio Division of Wildlife officer using night-vision goggles searched for the bear, who was shot and killed approximately an hour later.

September 19, 2008/Mount Gilead, Ohio: A nearly 500-pound “pet” black bear owned by Shane Mayberry was shot and killed by a sheriff’s deputy after the animal attacked and bit the officer in the leg. The deputy was treated at a local hospital for two puncture wounds to the leg.

June 24, 2008/Rising Sun, Maryland: Two black bears escaped from an enclosure at the Plumpton Park Zoo when a zookeeper failed to secure two latches and lock a door to the enclosure. One of the bears was euthanized because she became aggressive and the zoo did not have adequate safety equipment, trained personnel, and tranquilization equipment to safely recapture her.

April 29, 2008/Muskegon, Michigan: A bear escaped from the West Michigan Society for the Protection and Care of

Animals shelter and was tranquilized and recaptured about a week later.

April 22, 2008/Big Bear City, California: A 7½-foot-tall, 700-pound male grizzly bear named Rocky attacked and killed one of three men who were working with the animal at Predators in Action, a facility that trains animals for use in movies and television. The victim was bitten on the neck, could not be revived by paramedics, and was pronounced dead at the scene. Pepper spray was used to subdue and contain the bear, who had recently been featured in the movie *Semi-Pro*.

November 17, 2007/Farmington, Pennsylvania: A young woman was attacked by a bear at Woodland Zoo & More when she approached the animal’s cage during a “behind-the-scenes” tour. The bear swiped at her and then tried to drag her hand farther into the cage. She was flown via medical helicopter to a hospital. A man who tried to help her sustained minor scratches.

November 2, 2007/Coram, Montana: An employee at the Great Bear Adventure drive-through park was attacked by a brown bear and flown to a hospital to be treated for puncture wounds and multiple cuts.

September 27, 2007/West Palm Beach, Florida: Two 100-pound bear cubs escaped from an enclosure at the Palm Beach Zoo by squeezing through a gap that they had created. The bears were later tranquilized and recaptured.

September 15, 2007/Pigeon Forge, Tennessee: An employee at the Smoky Mountain Zoological Park was attacked by an Asian sloth bear while the employee was cleaning a pen. A malfunctioning gate allowed the bear to reenter the pen and maul the woman, tearing away most of the ligaments and tissues above her right hip

and causing permanent injuries and disfigurement.

December 2, 2006/Uhrichsville, Ohio: A 4-year-old boy was airlifted to the hospital after one of his fingers was bitten off near the first knuckle by a black bear. The boy had stuck his hand into a cage housing two bears at the Patterson Wildlife Ranch, which was owned by his grandfather.

October 2006/Branson, Missouri: A grizzly bear at Predator World escaped from an enclosure, gained access to an adjoining enclosure, and killed an adult female tiger.

May 22, 2006/Ashtabula County, Ohio: A woman was mauled by a 500-pound black bear who had escaped from a nearby animal compound known as Grand River Fur Exchange. The bear forced his way into the woman's home, knocked her to the floor, and attacked her. The woman's daughter hit and tugged at the animal but was unable to stop the attack until she lured the bear away with food. The woman was flown by emergency medical helicopter to the hospital for surgery. She sustained a bruised lung, a broken rib, a severe laceration on her head, significant damage to one ear, and lacerations and bites from the top of her head to her feet. The bear was shot through the lung and killed at the scene.

May 2006/Pocahontas County, West Virginia: A 400-pound Asian brown bear belonging to David Cassell escaped from an enclosure and was never found.

February 18, 2006/Richmond, Virginia: A 4-year-old boy was bitten by a black bear at Maymont Park when he climbed a 4-foot wooden fence and stuck his hand into a cage housing two bears. The boy was treated at a nearby hospital, and both bears were killed to be tested for rabies.

February 1, 2006/Flora, Illinois: An 80-year-old man was killed by a black bear who had escaped from a cage at a defunct petting zoo. The bear was shot and killed by a sheriff's deputy during the attack. Later, another bear at the zoo was killed by an off-duty deputy at the owner's request.

December 19, 2005/Chanute, Kansas: A "pet" bear, who had repeatedly escaped from captivity, followed a sheriff's deputy to his patrol car and climbed on top of the car. When the animal grabbed the driver's side mirror, the deputy beat the bear's nose with a flashlight. The bear let go and then went missing again.

November 6, 2004/Sarasota, Florida: A trainer was bitten by a bear at the Rosaire Big Cat Habitat and flown to the hospital to be treated for injuries.

September 11, 2004/Hanna City, Illinois: An employee at Wildlife Prairie State Park was attacked by a 300-pound black bear who had escaped from an unlocked cage. The man suffered bites to his right shoulder and left leg, and the flesh and muscle were torn from his right leg below the hip and above the knee, resulting in nerve and artery damage.

July 21, 2004/Coram, Montana: A grizzly bear at the Great Bear Adventure drive-through park swatted at a visitor's car window, breaking it. The driver sustained multiple cuts to her arm from broken glass.

July 10, 2004/Coram, Montana: An employee at the Great Bear Adventure drive-through park was attacked by a 600-pound grizzly bear. The man was knocked to the ground by the bear and sustained numerous puncture wounds and a punctured lung.

May 1, 2004/Silver Springs, Florida: A worker at the World of Bears theme park

was attacked by a Kodiak bear who gnawed on her arm and caused severe injuries requiring extensive reconstructive surgery and physical therapy.

February 5, 2004/St. Louis, Missouri: A keeper at the Saint Louis Zoo was attacked by a 6-year-old Malayan sun bear while cleaning the pen. The man suffered bites to his arms and legs and was treated at a hospital for cuts and puncture wounds.

2004/Queensbury, New York: A bear cub who was on exhibit at a AAA office by the Ashville Game Farm and Exotic Zoo bit a person in the face.

2004/Perrysburg, Ohio: Kenneth Hetrick, owner of a roadside zoo called Tiger Ridge Exotics, was mauled by two grizzly bears while he was cleaning a cage. As a female bear grabbed him and tried to drag him into the den box, a 700-pound male bear attacked him from behind. The male bear hit Hetrick on the head, almost knocking him unconscious, then picked him up, threw him, and shook him multiple times. Hetrick stated, "I looked like I had been in a hatchet fight," and said that it had taken hours for the doctor to stitch up his many wounds.

December 11, 2003/Natural Bridge, Virginia: Two Asiatic bears escaped from an enclosure at the Natural Bridge Zoo when a worker failed to latch a gate properly. One of the bears broke into a residential home through a window, "stood up and growled" when he encountered the homeowner, and then was shot dead by the zoo owner and a sheriff's deputy. The second bear took a swipe at the man as he ran from his home, was shot twice, and then ran into nearby woods where she was shot and killed by a hunter two days later.

August 26, 2003/Rainier, Washington: A black bear escaped for the fourth time from a private exotic animal menagerie and was

on the loose for an hour before being lured back into a cage by neighbors and a sheriff's deputy.

June 14, 2003/Idaville, Indiana: A bear bit off part of a woman's left index finger when the woman reached into the cage while on a tour of Great Cats of Indiana.

March 7, 2003/Golconda, Illinois: The Pope County sheriff's department warned residents to beware of a 7-foot, 500-pound "pet" black bear who had escaped from a man's home.

November 8, 2002/Omaha, Nebraska: A 5-foot black bear at Kipling's Animal Refuge escaped by digging his way out of an enclosure. The bear was spotted on the road by a passerby and recaptured by deputies.

December 11, 2001/Racine, Minnesota: A 10-month-old bear cub escaped from Bearcat Hollow animal park and damaged a neighboring farmhouse.

August 26, 2001/Marshallville, Ohio: A 4-year-old black bear attacked a 2-year-old boy who was climbing around the bear cage. After being bitten and clawed, the boy was rushed to the hospital, where he was admitted for reconstructive surgery to his calf. The bear was the boy's grandfather's "pet," and the family disposed of the bear after the incident.

April 10, 2001/Verndale, Minnesota: A man was hospitalized in stable condition after he was mauled by the family's "pet" bear while he was repairing the cage in the family's backyard corncrib.

June 11, 2000/Natural Bridge, Virginia: A visitor to the Natural Bridge Zoo was bitten and/or scratched by one of three Asiatic bear cubs.

June 6, 2000/Broken Arrow, Oklahoma: A 3-year-old black bear at Safari's Exotic Animal Sanctuary who had been spayed and declawed attacked a handler when he entered the cage for feeding. The handler was hospitalized with bite wounds to his arms and legs as well as a severed artery. One gash was 4 inches long, ½ inch wide, and ½ inch deep. Handlers routinely enter bear cages to "hug" the animals at this facility. This was the same bear who attacked a different handler on June 1. The bear was euthanized.

June 1, 2000/Broken Arrow, Oklahoma: A 3-year-old black bear at Safari's Exotic Animal Sanctuary attacked a handler, who required 20 stitches after being bitten on both wrists.

December 13, 1999/Ellijay, Georgia: A 500-pound, 7-foot Himalayan bear attacked a man who was feeding the bear at a roadside zoo called Ellijay Wildlife Rehabilitation Sanctuary. The man was hospitalized in serious condition and underwent surgery to his arm. The bear was shot and killed.

March 28, 1998/Reform, Missouri: A 600-pound "pet" black bear bit and nearly severed the hand of a 6-year-old boy who tried to pet the animal, who had been kept for a decade in a 15-foot-by-15-foot cage on the boy's grandfather's farm. Doctors reattached the boy's hand, which was connected by 1½ inches of skin. The bear was killed.

March 17, 1997/Grand Rapids, Michigan: A bear with Tarzan Zerbini Circus performing for Shriners bit off the tip of a 2-year-old child's finger. The child had to undergo surgery to repair her finger. There were no safety barriers around the bear cages, and about 30 other children had been petting the bear.

December 29, 1996/Coal County, Oklahoma: An 8-year-old girl was attacked by a neighbor's "pet" black bear when she tried to pet the animal. She sustained a broken arm and eight deep bites. The bear was euthanized.

September 28, 1996/Whitmire, South Carolina: An 8-year-old boy lost part of his finger when he was slashed by his great-grandmother's "pet" bear while helping to feed the animals.

May 21, 1995/Spring Hill, Kansas: A woman was hospitalized after she was bitten on the thigh by her "pet" black bear when she entered the cage.

September 11, 1994/Anchorage, Alaska: A polar bear at the Alaska Zoo mauled a teenager who got too close to the cage. The 19-year-old was hospitalized in serious condition with leg injuries. The same bear had mauled a woman in July.

July 30, 1994/Anchorage, Alaska: A polar bear at the Alaska Zoo badly mauled a woman who got too close to the cage in order to take photos.

September 30, 1993/Prophetstown, Illinois: A trained "circus" bear inflicted bite wounds on a man's arm and legs when the man tried to pet him through the cage. The bear was later killed. This is the same bear who had mauled a person in October 1992.

September 20, 1993/Newberg Township, Michigan: A man was fatally mauled by his brother-in-law's "pet" black bear when he entered the pen for feeding. Police killed the bear.

July 1993/Patterson, New York: A declawed and defanged 23-year-old Himalayan black bear who had been used in circuses escaped from an enclosure and disappeared into nearby woods.

October 1992/Prophetstown, Illinois: A trained "circus" bear mauled a man.

February 22, 1992/Dane County, Wisconsin: A man underwent surgery to repair torn tendons in his ankle after he was attacked by a bear while participating in a bear "wrestling" event sponsored by Jungleworld Animal Rental Agency.

October 29, 1990/Galesburg, Michigan: A 10-year-old boy, his mother, and his grandfather were mauled by one of the family's "pet" bears while cleaning the cages.

March 28, 1990/Cincinnati, Ohio: A polar bear at the Cincinnati Zoo bit off a keeper's right arm while the woman was feeding the animal. A jury later awarded the keeper nearly \$3.5 million. The keeper charged that the zoo had made the 800-pound bear hostile by keeping him in a 10-foot cage without lighting, recreation, or ventilation.