



# BEAR PHOTOGRAPHY HANDBOOK

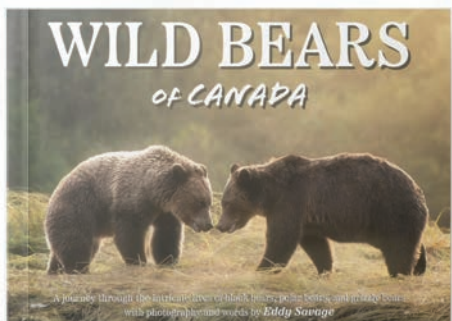
by Eddy Savage

**WILD BEARS**  
*OF CANADA*

# About Eddy Savage

Eddy Savage is a career wildlife guide, photographer, and author from Vancouver Island, British Columbia, Canada. He's spent over 15 years leading nature-based photography expeditions in Canada and abroad. His primary focus has been on sharing the intricate lives of wild bears with travelers and photographer. He's spent thousands of hours observing and photographing wild grizzly bears, black bears, and polar bears in a non-intrusive way.

As a photographer, his camera has always stayed by his side, and he has long maintained an extensive catalog of photos from his forays into the bears realm. His experience gives him a unique perspective on spending time in bear habitat and this handbook is meant to help you prepare for your next adventure to find wild bears.



## About Wild Bears of Canada

The 138-page book provides detailed insight into the lives of polar bears, black bears, and grizzly bears based on over a decade's experience watching and learning from them. It's a collection of carefully selected photos, important bear information, and field observations from Eddy's career as a bear viewing guide and photographer.

## Where to follow Eddy



Instagram: @eddysavagephoto



Facebook: Eddy Savage - The Wilderness Gallery



Website: [www.wildbearsofcanada.com](http://www.wildbearsofcanada.com)







# Get to know bears

When reviewing my photos of bears, I often try to recall the exact moments leading up to the shot. One of the consistent notes I have, is that I was often anticipating the shot based on the bears behaviour. There is no doubt you can get lots of great images of bears without prior knowledge; bears are beautiful and charismatic after-all, however, by going into the field with someone who has that “bear sense” or simply a strong understanding of bear behaviour will absolutely supercharge your photography.

There is also a misconception that bears are “unpredictable” which, from my experience, I have learned to firmly disagree with. Bears have a wonderfully predictable nature about them, as well as clearly broadcast body language. Bears avoid conflict by using this body language which I call “non-violent bear communication.” This could include, but not limited to, chuffing, jaw popping, posturing, direct staring, pseudo-feeding, etc. Having observed bears for thousands upon thousands of hours, I am now fluent in “non-violent bear communication.” This fluency gives me seconds to minutes of advanced notice of what a bear is likely to do next.

There is also opportunity to gain a reasonable sense of bear behaviour prior to heading into the field, with or without an experienced guide. There are ample resources available to help you better understand the family of bears both in print and online. There are bear safety training courses, bear viewing certifications, and ample other forms of media available. Regardless, it is always an advantage to utilize a skilled guides service for the best photography outcomes.



## Key takeaways:

- Exploring an area with a local and experienced guide / photographer will give you a leg-up
- Learn bear behaviour to better prepare yourself for in-the-moment photo opportunities
- [www.bearwise.org](http://www.bearwise.org)
- [www.wildsafebc.com](http://www.wildsafebc.com)





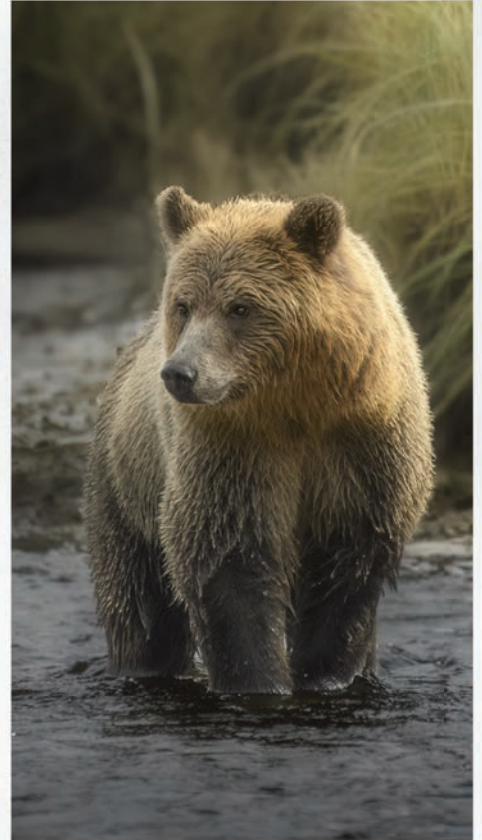


# Stay Versatile

When operating in the field, I try to make my kit as streamlined as possible. When I am organizing my kit before a trip, I always consult my check-list (at the end of this book) to ensure I didn't forget anything critical but also to ensure I did not over-pack. Having too much gear, too many bags, too many legs (tripods in some cases) can slow you down when you want to be smooth and fast while photographing bears. I don't a tripod when photographing bears because the dynamic and ever-changing environment makes the legs, set-up and take-down too cumbersome. It really slows me down and prime moments can be missed. You can imagine if you're shooting with a group of photographers and we all had tripods and the bears changed directions, tripping, fumbling, and noise will follow. If you absolutely need something to stabilize your gear, bring a monopod.

I always bring a sturdy camera harness with me on bear photograph trips. I'm often in chest waders or rubber boots while ambling along the edge of rivers, meandering through estuaries, or in and out of boats. I want to keep my hands free, or on a trekking pole so I don't trip, slip, or fall. Having my camera secure on the chest harness allows me to have both hands available and be more maneuverable in the field.

As well, having practiced with my equipment before getting on site makes a big difference. Fumbling around trying to get your camera set-up, or find a memory card, batteries, etc while some great bear action is happening isn't an option. Being efficient with your kit, knowing where things are stored, and practicing before you head into the field will give you a big advantage.



## My bear photography kit:

- Nikon Z8 Mirrorless
- Nikon Z 24-120mm
- Nikon Z 100-400mm
- Nikon Z 1.4 teleconverter
- Camera Chest Harness
- Camera Backpack
- Extra batteries and memory cards
- 2x3' microfibre towel (for rain)
- Lens cloth
- Waterproof cover for camera

NOTE: See the last page of this guide for a comprehensive printable bear photography checklist.







# Dress for Success

Considering bears operate in any weather condition imaginable, it is best to prepare yourself to operate in the same way. Heading to the rainforest? Bring your best rain-gear. Off to find polar bears in the Arctic? It is going to be cold, and your hands, head, and feet will get the coldest, so bring good gloves & lines, a warm hat, and suitable socks. You get the idea. Being well prepared with suitable gear for the expected weather conditions gives you the upper-hand when in the field. Get to know these items, and find a spot in your pack where you know they will always live. The less time you need to spend taking care of your physical needs, the more time and opportunities you will have with your camera and with the bears.



## Essential Personal Gear

### *A solid base-layer.*

I have a mid-weight base-layer that I wear on almost every trip to find bears. It's light enough that it stays cool in the sun, and heavy enough that it holds heat well in wet-cold or dry-cold conditions.

### *Pants that you know.*

It might be funny to think about what pants you have as being important, but when you are in the thick of the moment with wildlife, time is at a premium. Being able to keep track of the gear you have goes a long way. I wear the same style of pants wherever I travel and memorize my pockets and their contents. For example: micro-fibre cloth is in my left cargo pocket. Filters in my right pocket. Spare batteries in my front right. Notepad in my top left, etc..

### *A vest or top layer with pockets.*

Every trip to every destination I wear a similar vest. It adds to my organization so that spare items like filters, batteries, memory cards, lens cloths, etc are all easily and quickly accessible.

### *Ball-cap, warm hat, sun-glasses*

Another reminder to stay familiar with your gear. Having a hat or sunglasses you know and love will make things a lot easier. You want the transition between weather conditions and corresponding clothing to be seamless. The less time you spend struggling with cumbersome specialized hats and gear, the more time you'll have for snapping images. If you've got a favourite ball-cap that works in most of your outings, that'll be fine.

## Other Helpful Gear Tips

- Take the time to familiarize yourself with your field gear before you head out.
- Be consistent. Find what works for you and stick with it.
- Ask other photographers what works for them, or about particular boots, jackets, hats, etc
- Always look to improve your gear and your efficiency.







# Optimal Camera Settings

There is no one correct way to photograph bears. I have a couple of preferred camera set-ups that allow me to be flexible, versatile, and preserve image quality in the face of low light. They ensure I will get sharp or sharp-enough images, enough detail in the shadows, and never overexpose a scene, no matter how much it changes.

Before selecting your settings for photographing bears, consider the environment, the weather, direction and quality of light. Of course, before you make the journey into the field its great to test out these settings at a local park or in your back yard to ensure you're understanding how each setting works under different condition. Know your camera like you know your gear.









# Optimal Camera Settings

## Manual Mode (my favourite)

Set your Camera to Manual (M) Mode and use the following settings:

- Shutter Speed:  $1/1000$  to  $1/2000$
- Aperture / F-Stop: Widest (lowest number)
- Auto-ISO: Set a Min and MAX ISO in menu
  - Usually 100 min and 6400 max for my camera
- White Balance AUTO / Natural Light AUTO
- Exposure Compensation: Scene dependant.
  - Dark Scene:  $\pm 0.0$  to  $-0.7$
  - Bright Scene(snowy):  $+0.3$  to  $+1.0$
- Optical Stabilization (VR/OS/IS) - Shutter  $> 1/1000$  = OFF
- Optical Stabilization (VR/OS/IS) - Shutter  $< 1/1000$  ON
- Auto-focus mode: AF-C / AI SERVO (tracking)
- AF points: Single Point or Single Point Extended
- Image Size: RAW

My favourite shooting mode is Manual with Auto ISO. This setting enables me to actively manage my shutter speed (to ensure sharp images) and to manage my aperture (to control my depth of field). The ISO is set to auto, with a limit for max and minimums, so that my image quality is protected.



# Optimal Camera Settings

## Aperture Priority

- Shutter Speed: Automatically follows your Aperture & ISO
- Aperture / F-Stop: Widest to 7.1 or 8
- Manual-ISO: Manually change your ISO based on changing conditions
- Usually 100 min and 6400 max for my camera
- White Balance AUTO / Natural Light AUTO
- Exposure Compensation: Scene dependent.
- Dark Scene: +/-0.0 to -0.7
- Bright Scene (snowy): +0.3 to +1.0
- Optical Stabilization (VR/OS/IS) - Shutter > 1/1000 = OFF
- Optical Stabilization (VR/OS/IS) - Shutter < 1/1000 ON
- Auto-focus mode: AF-C / AI SERVO (tracking)
- AF points: Single Point or Single Point Extended
- Image Size: RAW

I will use Aperture Priority and let my shutter speed adjust to changing scenes. I like this in conjunction with manually adjusting ISO so I preserve image quality while simultaneously watching my shutter speed change. Because the Aperture is fixed, whenever I manually shift the ISO, the Shutter will respond automatically.



# Optimal Camera Settings

## Shutter Priority

- Shutter Speed: 1/1000 to 1/2000
- Aperture / F-Stop: Follows your Shutter & ISO
- Manual-ISO: Set a Min and MAX ISO in menu
- Usually 100 min and 6400 max for my camera
- White Balance AUTO / Natural Light AUTO
- Exposure Compensation: Scene dependant.
- Dark Scene: +/-0.0 to -0.7
- Bright Scene(snowy): +0.3 to +1.0
- Optical Stabilization (VR/OS/IS) - Shutter > 1/1000 = OFF
- Optical Stabilization (VR/OS/IS) - Shutter < 1/1000 ON
- Auto-focus mode: AF-C / AI SERVO (tracking)
- AF points: Single Point or Single Point Extended
- Image Size: RAW

Use shutter priority to achieve the shutter speed you desire. Because the shutter is fixed, your aperture will change automatically. I might use this setting on extremely bright days where there is plenty of light and high shutter speeds are attainable. With that said, I don't like losing control of my aperture because poor depth of field can significantly change the feel of a bear picture.







# *How to compose a bear photo*



## *The Bear Portrait*

Bear faces. A bear's face tells its life story. There is emotion that can be seen in the bear's eyes, ears, nose, scarring, etc. No two bear faces are the same, each carrying a distinct ratio of ears to eyes to nose etc. As well, bears have very dexterous lips, expressive eyes, and a nose that swivels in each direction. The ears are also active, standing tall, laying low, or simply relaxed. Sometimes a bear portrait is more dramatic when cropped in even tighter than its entire head, and only half of its face. Bears remind us of ourselves in many ways, and so, a bear face can convey just as many feelings and emotions as we experience. Keep an eye out for distinct fur colouration, scarring, eye whites & reflection, eye position, perceived emotion, teeth, and nose position.











# How to compose a bear photo



## Emphasize the Landscape

Bears can have small ranges (Giant Panda – 25kmsq) and bears can have extremely large ranges (Polar Bear – 1,000,000kmsq). Each species of bear has a strikingly different habitat to convey through your photography. It is often our instinct to try to get closer and tighter on a photography subject – looking for more quality and texture in the animal. However, this often leaves us overlooking the grand beauty of the world the bear thrives in. Try zooming out a little, capturing some surroundings, sky, water, and foreground. Don't just focus on the bear, put the bear in its environment.



# *How to compose a bear photo*



## *Focus on Family Time*

One of humanities greatest parallels to the bear world is mothers and cubs. The nurturing we observe in wild bears reminds us of the humans' journey of raising children. The bears mother-cub relationship is long relative to other species, and in some instances can reach upwards of four years. There is a tenderness and closeness within family groups not seen elsewhere in the bear world. By focusing on this intimate part of life, we can connect on a deeper level with our viewers. If you're lucky enough to see a family group, take as many shots as possible with as many different angles, frames, backgrounds, and focal lengths as possible.











# How to compose a bear photo



## Try Something Different

In the endless journey exploring new and different perspectives for photographing bears, one must allow the creative eye to take hold. Using the previous pages as foundation for bear photography we can be sure to capture some great images. However, stepping a little outside of your comfort zone can yield some intriguing results. I have tried and failed hundreds of times while creating bear images, but I encourage you to try new things and don't be afraid to make mistakes. Here are some examples:

- Bear panoramics: vertical or horizontal. Bring in the landscape.
- Bear “macro”: features like claws, paws, teeth, fur, ears, eyes. If you're close enough, zoom in and try it out.
- Slow your shutter: capture the action or movement around the bear. Some examples: grasses blowing in the wind, a flowing river, movement of paws while flying, etc
- Don't be afraid to back-light the bear – silhouettes look amazing







# Bear Photography Kit Checklist

- ☐ **Camera** (telephoto capable if not an interchangeable lens camera)
- ☐ **Telephoto lenses** (range between 70 and 400mm minimum)
- ☐ **Memory cards** (look for fast and large cards and more than you think you'll need)
- ☐ **Spare batteries** (always best to have more than you need)
- ☐ **Camera rain cover** (to protect from the inevitable environment)
- ☐ **Lens cloth / pen** (for cleaning smudges / dust from lenses)
- ☐ **Microfiber towel** (two feet wide for drying camera if it rains)
- ☐ **Camera harness / strap** (strong enough to secure your camera while hiking)
- ☐ **Binoculars** (lets me scan for incoming wildlife)
- ☐ **Camera Backpack** (comfortable and big enough for your kit)
  
- ☐ **Suitable layers for your shooting location** (I use a lighter merino wool base-layer all over the world in all seasons))
- ☐ See "Dress fo Success" page for more details on clothes to bring
- ☐ **Rain Jacket / Wind Breaker** (useful in most bear habitat)
- ☐ **Location specific footwear** (hikers? rubber boots? -40 boots?)
- ☐ **Windproof / warm glove liners** (so helpful when the wind kicks up)
- ☐ **Warm hat & ball cap** (wind proof and covers the ears helps a lot)
- ☐ **Polarized sunglasses** (cuts the reflection and glare by water)
  
- ☐ **Laptop** (portable and loaded with your favourite editing software)
- ☐ **Card reader** (get you photos off your camera)
- ☐ **Portable hard drives** (Back up your shots every night)
- ☐ **Smart phone** (helpful for photos, taking notes, etc)

Checklist by Eddy Savage  
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