

**BUCKETTRIPPER**<[HTTP://WWW.BUCKETTRIPPER.COM/](http://www.buckettripper.com/)>*Adventure is our state of mind***Meeting The Bear Whisperer of Mammoth Mountain**By *Yvette Cardozo* <<http://www.buckettripper.com/author/yecardozo/>>

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*Steve Searles, Mammoth Mountain's bear whisperer. Photo courtesy of Steve Searles.*

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- This is just plain, seriously cool.
- Good for: Animal lovers and families.

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“There is a bear within 600 yards of here,” Steve Searles told a group of us gathered for breakfast in one of the village hotels at Mammoth Mountain ski area.

Yes, it was spring and Mammoth's black bear population was waking up. They were groggy. They were grouchy. They were hungry. And they were ALL over the place, curled up under houses, in drainage ditches, under bridges.

When Searles started his job as the Mammoth Police Department's bear wrangler 17 years ago, the emphasis was more on getting rid of bears by any means. He was a hunter and the initial plan was for him to kill the bears.

“But we'd get rid of eight bears and eight more would show up. People were feeding them and we got to thinking, maybe there's another way,” Searles explained.

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**In Your Bucket Because...**

You are interested in what bears are really like.  
You are also interested in how Searles deals with them.



*An example of the damage a bear can cause inside someone's home. Photo courtesy of Steve Searles.*

Slowly, he came to realize the real way to deal with bears was to understand them and try to get them moving along as quickly and safely as possible.

“We started using beanbags, rubber bullets and fireworks instead of bullets and the results were almost instant. They would go and not come back. We never shot a bear again. Today, we live with the bears and there are actually two within a block of this hotel right now.”

**Bear Wrangling 101**

Not that there haven't been some hiccups. Last season, Searles was trying to coax a bear out from under a bridge but he accidentally got in the way of its escape path. That, he said with a slightly embarrassed shrug, was a mistake.

And it was all caught on film by [Animal Planet](http://www.thebearwhisperer.com/index.php?start=6)<<http://www.thebearwhisperer.com/index.php?start=6>>. There was Searles yelling “Go back! Knock it off! You bad bear! NO!!!.” And then the camera bounced and there was scuffling but Searles and the camera crew got out of the way. And the bear made his hasty retreat.

Searles was explaining all of this at our convention breakfast. He will do these talks upon request, for free. His most recent talks had included a group at Mammoth for a religious retreat and a bunch of Harley Davidson dudes. In summer, he does nature walks on forest service land, talks for local children's groups and service clubs.



*A bear cub where he shouldn't be. Photo courtesy of Steve Searles.*

"There's no fee to the group," he said, "I get paid by the town. You just need to contact me and make a reservation."

Searles went on, explaining his approach. "They call me the bear whisperer but, really, I don't whisper. I shout."

Yes, he does. And he also recognizes some two dozen sounds in the bears' vocabulary.

"There's blowing and clacking and mooing and hissing," Searles said, adding a convincing bear chuffing sound. He's actually been able to successfully call cubs down from a tree with the right sounds.

There are 26 bears within the 26 square mile Mammoth area.

"We have the most bears of any state in the US ... 29,000 bears."

Not grizzlies, though. They were exterminated decades ago. These are black bears, which are smaller and less aggressive but can, nevertheless, grow to 500 pounds.

"No one as ever been killed in California by a bear. Ever," he said, adding, "And yet we continue to shoot them for what they might do."

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## It's Not Easy Being A Bear

Meanwhile, the life of a bear is not easy. Fifty percent die before they are 18 months old, which is why Searles doesn't name them until they're at least two. The names are descriptive ... One Ear, Half Nose, Big Bear. It helps Searles keep track of the adults.

They live 20 years at the most.

"The oldest in town now is 17. He's grazing on the grass at the golf course right now."

When the bears first wake up, they're groggy and still sleep 20 hours a day. They eat grass to flush their system and they tend to come out during the wee hours of the morning ... like vampires, Searles added.

All that changes as the weather warms and vegetation grows. By midsummer, they're in a feeding frenzy, 24 hours a day.

That's when Searles' job also becomes 24 hours a day, seven days a week. He can go seven months without a day off.

"We have no issues with the bears in the ski area. Trash is patrolled. Bears are not fed and we don't let them stay under decks and porches."



*Bear Whisperer Steve Searles and one of his friends, a California black bear. Photo courtesy of Steve Searles*

Searles says he needs to mimic bear behavior ... quiet, stealthy, firm. But occasionally it doesn't quite go that way.

"I had two officers try tasers on the bears. Boy, was that a rodeo."

In the end, Searles has come to believe bears are ... just bears.

"We humans believe there has to be a bad guy, but the bears have taught me they're not dangerous. Men are dangerous. Bears don't rob or rape. I was wrong to think bears are bad."

### Practicalities

The bears start waking up in early spring as the weather warms. If you see a bear, keep your distance and just watch. But if it's getting into trash or trying to get into a home, call the police department's non emergency line: 760-934-2011, ext 1, then ext 7. If you feel you or someone else is in danger from the bear being

too close or aggressive, call 911.

#### More links:

- For a video showing bears in early spring, eating grass, playing and just being bears.
- To contact Steve Searles
- For Mammoth Mountain ski resort

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### Yvette Cardozo (Yvette Cardozo)

Yvette Cardozo has been roaming the globe looking for adventure for ... a while. This has included heli skiing, week long dogsled trips above the Arctic Circle, scuba diving in Antarctica and more mundane stuff, usually involving bicycles. She has written thousands of print articles and is now branching out into online media. She also does pro quality photography and is under contract with Getty Images. Oh yes, and she loves adventurous food ... bring on the fried tarantulas!

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