

BLACK BEAR

(*Ursus americanus*)

Ursidae Family/Omnivore



NPS Photo



Black bears are only found in North America and while they are generally black, in certain regions they are brown, red, golden or white in colour. They inhabit all of their historical ranges except where large cities exist. Black bears have adapted very well to a human altered landscape. They are increasingly found within recreation areas, towns and suburban areas attracted by food and garbage.



Black bears are solitary animals except during mating season.

Cubs are born hairless, measure 15 to 20 cm in length and weigh 0.2 to 0.4 kg at birth – about one two-hundredths of their mother's weight. They begin leaving the den at spring thaw. Normally, young bears remain with their mother (called a sow) until they are 16 to 17 months old. Females are usually full-grown by the age of five, while some males may continue to grow even after the age of seven.

Special features: Black bears are bulky, thickset mammals that often appear much heavier than they really are. They have small eyes, rounded ears, a long snout, a short tail, and shaggy hair. Adult males typically weigh about 135 kg, although the largest on record weighed over 360 kg. Females are much smaller than males, averaging 70 kg. Standing up on its hind feet, a black bear can be up to 7 feet tall.

The long-distance eyesight of the black bear is relatively poor, but its senses of hearing and smell are well developed. The lips of the black bear, unlike those of other animals, are free from the gums and the bear can use them with amazing dexterity. This adaptation and a long manipulative tongue help the bear to pick small berries and insects.

Each paw has five long curved claws, which the bear cannot retract. These are very strong and are used for digging and tearing out roots, stumps, and old logs when searching for food. Black bears are powerful swimmers, excellent climbers and can run up to speeds of 55km/hr. Although black bears can stand and walk on their hind legs normally they walk on all fours.

Black bears eat both plants and animals and will eat almost anything available. They are primarily **foragers** but will also hunt animals.

Bears are not true hibernators since they remain somewhat alert during winter months; however, they do not eat or eliminate waste, and survive entirely on their stored fat. During the winter they may lose up to 30 percent of their pre-denning weight. Most bears continue to lose weight until summer when quantities of berries start to become available.

Food: Emerging plant shoots, leaves and bark, fruits, berries and nuts, crawling and flying insects and larvae, **carrion**, honey, fish, small mammals. Occasionally, birds, bear **cubs**, newborn moose, caribou or elk calves or deer fawns.



Black bears are fond of eating rotting garbage.

NPS Photo

Denning: Black bears spend winters in hollowed-out dens in tree cavities, under logs or rocks, in hillside holes or caves, in **culverts** or in shallow depressions. Dens are normally not reused from one year to the next.

Predators: Predators include older bears and occasionally wolves, coyotes, cougars and lynx.

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Distribution:

All Provinces/Territories except
Prince Edward Island and
southern Saskatchewan/
Southern Alberta.

Maturity:

3 to 5 years

Average life span:

10 years

Mating:

Mid-June to mid-July

Young born:

Mid-January to early February

Gestation:

210 to 240 days due to **delayed
implantation** (active **gestation** 47 days,
1 litter every two years/Average 2 to 3 cubs)

Habitat:

Forests and dense bush, burned areas,
swamps, tidelands, and grasslands.

Management Issues:

Adaptation to people plus habitat
encroachment by humans has increased
human-bear conflicts. While rare, attacks
happen when a black bear has lost its fear
of humans. Livestock **predations** and
raids on bee hives and vegetable and
fruit crops can be significant problems.
Black bears can do extensive forest
destruction by debarking and killing trees.

