

# BLACK BEAR



The largest hunted animal in Pennsylvania is the black bear, *Ursus americanus*. The species ranges through much of forested North America from Mexico to Alaska and from Florida to northern Canada. In different regions, black bears exhibit different life patterns, denning times, tolerance of human activity, habitat preferences, home range, reproduction behavior, pelt coloration, and even size and weight. The following information pertains to the black bear in the northeastern United States.

## Biology

Bears are powerfully built animals. Adults are 50-85 inches in length, including a 3-5 inch tail. They stand about 30 inches at the shoulder and weights range from 140-400 pounds, with rare individuals weighing over 600 pounds. Males, sometimes called boars, tend to be considerably larger and heavier than females (sows).

Most Pennsylvania bears are black, although a few are cinnamon-color. (In other parts of its range, *Ursus americanus* may be brown, whitish, or bluish-gray, but the majority are black.) The body is glossy black, the muzzle tinged with tan. Often a bear will have on its chest a white mark, sometimes in a prominent "V." The fur is thick, long, and fairly soft. Sexes are colored alike.

Bears walk in a shuffling, flat-footed manner. Each foot has five toes, each with a curved claw. Extremely agile for their size, bears sometimes stand erect on their hind feet to see and smell better. Top speed is 30 m.p.h. over a short distance. Black bears climb easily and swim well.

Black bears have an acute sense of smell, but vision is poor. Hearing is not believed to be acute. They occasionally growl or "woof," and when injured, sob and bawl in a human-like voice. Sows communicate to their cubs with low grunts, huffs, and mumbles.

Bears are mainly nocturnal, although they sometimes feed

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and travel by day. Alert and wary, they tend to avoid open areas. Individuals are solitary. While most bears will run from a human, a female with cubs should be respected and on rare occasions might actually attack if she feels her young are in danger. The more accustomed to humans bears become (as in a park or garbage dump setting), the less likely they are to run away, and the greater their potential danger.

Bears find food mainly by scent. They are opportunistic feeders, with a largely vegetarian diet. Common foods are fruit (including large amounts of many kinds of berries), mast (acorns and beechnuts), succulent leaves of hardwoods, grasses, insects (including eggs and larvae), plant roots, amphibians, reptiles, small mammals, fish, carrion, and garbage. An occasional bear runs afoul of humans by preying on pigs, goats, or sheep (a male is usually responsible for such actions); by eating corn (often because mast is limited or unavailable); by raiding campers' food stores; and by destroying honeybee colonies (beekeepers with such problems should protect their hives with electric fences). Bears drink water frequently, and in hot weather they wallow in streams.

In autumn, bears eat heavily to fatten themselves for winter. The winter den may be a hollow tree or log, an excavation, a crevice in a rock ledge; it may be a "nest" on top of the ground, or under fallen trees or brush, in a cavity under a large rock or beneath the roots of a tree; or it may be in a drainage culvert or a depression dug in the ground. Some bears line their dens with bark, grasses, or leaves. Females often select more sheltered sites than males. Males den alone, as do pregnant females (they give birth in the den). Females with first-year cubs den with their young.

In winter, bears den up and become dormant. They lapse into and out of a deep sleep, from which they may be roused. Body temperature is not drastically reduced. Respiration and heart rate might decline noticeably. They do not urinate or defecate while dormant. Bears in poor condition den for shorter periods than those in better shape. On warm, late-winter days, they may emerge to look for food.

In some areas, bears wear down trails with their travels. Individuals may scar prominent trees with claw and tooth marks; these "bear trees" may mark a territory or signal availability during mating season.

Bears mate from early June to mid-July. It is generally accepted that they are polygamous. The male does not help rear young.

Females give birth to cubs 7-7½ months later, from late December through early February while in the winter den. Litter sizes range from 1-5, with 3 most frequent in Pennsylvania. Newborns are covered with fine dark hair, through which their pink skin shows. They are 6-9 inches long and weigh 6-12 ounces. Their eyes and ears are closed.



Cubs nurse in the den. After about four weeks, their eyes open. They begin to walk at about 60 days. They leave the den when three months old, are weaned by seven months, and by fall usually weigh 60-100 pounds. Bears traveling in groups in autumn are usually assumed to be females and their cubs.

Cubs are playful, romping in water and wrestling with their littermates. The female protects them, sending them up trees if danger threatens. Males occasionally kill and eat cubs.

In most cases, cubs den with their mothers for their first winter. The family group disbands the following summer, when the female again is ready to breed. A female generally raises only one litter every two years. Most females breed for the first time when 3½ years old.

Mortality factors include hunting, damage control, accidents, and highway kills. Bears host ticks, fleas, lice, and internal parasites. In the wild, a rare individual might live to 25 years.

## Population

In Pennsylvania, most bears are found in the northcentral and northeast regions. There are less concentrated populations in the southcentral and southwestern parts of the state. The total population probably is between 4,000 and 6,000.

Periodic harvesting, through hunting, minimizes what we humans call "bear problems" — honeybee, livestock, and crop destruction.

To fine-tune the use of hunting as a management tool, the Game Commission is working to establish bear range management units. Allocating licenses by such units would permit more predictable harvests, help to maintain the population at levels acceptable to human residents, and at the same time have a bear population that could be hunted annually.

## Habitat

In northcentral Pennsylvania, bears inhabit wooded country. In spring and summer, they frequent openings to feed on fresh vegetation and berries; in fall, they occupy dense, regenerating clearcuts and mountain laurel thickets. In the northeast, our state's other pocket of prime bruin habitat, bears favor brushy swamps with rhododendron, blueberry, and spruce; they also inhabit mixed hardwood forests, especially where underbrush is thick.

Bears range over large areas. Movement is affected by food availability, breeding activities, and harassment by humans.

Shrinking bear habitat is a big problem in Pennsylvania and many other states. Although bears show remarkable adaptability in living close to humans, their numbers decline as their habitat shrinks. Protecting suitable wild lands is probably the single best habitat management tool. Vacation homes (particularly in the northeast), highways, and town and city expansion, all cut into the bear range.

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