

Black Bear

Black bears (*Ursus americanus*) are the most abundant and widely distributed of the three species of North American bears. They have been recorded in all states except Hawaii. In Alaska, black bears occur over most of the forested areas of the state. They are not found on the Seward Peninsula, on the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, or north of the Brooks Range. They also are absent from some of the large islands of the Gulf of Alaska, notably Kodiak, Montague, Hinchinbrook and others, and from the Alaska Peninsula beyond the area of Lake Iliamna. In Southeast Alaska, black bears occupy most islands with the exceptions of Admiralty, Baranof, Chichagof, and Kruzof. These are inhabited by brown bears. Both species occur on the southeastern mainland. Black bears are most often associated with forests, but depending on the season of the year, they may be found from sea level to alpine areas.

General description: Black bears are the smallest of the North American bears. Adult bears stand about 29 inches (.73 m) at the shoulders and measure about 60 inches (1.5 m) from nose to tail. The tail is about two inches long. Males are larger than females. An average adult male in spring weighs about 180-200 pounds (81.8 to 90.9 kg). They are considerably lighter when they emerge from winter dormancy and may be 20 percent heavier in the fall when they are fat.

The color of this bear over its entire range varies from jet black to white. A very rare white or creamy phase occurs on Kermode Island and vicinity in British Columbia. Three colors are common in Alaska. Black is the most often encountered color, but brown or cinnamon bears are often seen in Southcentral Alaska and the Southeast mainland. The rare blue (glacier) phase may be seen in the Yakutat area and has been reported in other parts of Southeast Alaska. Only the black color phase is seen on the islands of Southeast. Black bears may have a patch of white hair on the fronts of their chests.

Black bears are most easily distinguished from brown bears by their straight facial profile and their claws which are sharply curved and seldom over 1½ inches in length. Positive identification can be made by measuring the upper rear molar which is never more than 1¼ inches long in the black bear and is never less than that in a brown bear. Black bears have adequate senses of sight and hearing. They do have, however, an outstanding sense of smell.

Life history: Mating can take place anytime from June through July. Apart from that time, black bears are usually solitary, except for sows with cubs. The fertilized egg will not implant in the uterus until the fall. The cubs are born in their dens following a gestation period of about seven months. The cubs are born blind, nearly hairless, and weigh under a pound (.4 kg). Upon emerging from the den in May, they may weigh about 5 pounds (2.3 kg) and are covered with fine woolly hair. They are able to follow their mothers quite well. One to four cubs may be born, but two is most common. Cubs apparently remain with their mothers through the first winter following birth. Bears mature sexually at 3 to 6 years of age, depending upon their environment. In their more southern ranges they will breed every other year unless a litter is lost early during the first summer, then the sow will breed again that year. In more marginal environments such as northern Alaska, black bears keep their cubs with them an extra year and will breed every third year.

Food habits: Black bears are creatures of opportunity when it comes to food. There are, however, certain patterns of food-seeking which they follow. Upon emergence in the spring, freshly sprouted green vegetation is their main food item, but they will eat nearly anything they encounter. Winter-killed animals are readily eaten, and in some areas black bears have been found to be effective predators on newborn moose calves. As summer progresses, feeding shifts to salmon if they are available. In areas without salmon, bears rely primarily on vegetation throughout the year. Berries, especially blueberries, are an important late summer-fall food item. Ants, grubs, and other insects help to round out the black bear's diet. Male bears may occasionally prey on their own young.

Winter dormancy: As with brown bears, black bears spend the winter months in a state of hibernation. Their body temperatures drop, their metabolic rate is reduced, and they sleep for long periods. Bears enter this dormancy period in the fall, after most food items become hard to find. They emerge in the spring when food is again available. Occasionally, in the more southern ranges, bears will emerge from their dens during winter. In the northern part of their range, bears may be dormant for as long as seven to eight months. Females with cubs usually emerge later than lone bears. Dens may be found from sea level to alpine areas. They may be located in rock cavities, hollow trees, self-made excavations, even on the ground.

Human use: At one time black bears were classified as furbearers and were heavily used as such. Now there is a growing appreciation for them as a meat and trophy animal. Black bears are so common and widely distributed that they often cause damage at homesteads, construction camps, or even in towns and are destroyed as nuisance animals. These depredation kills can be minimized or eliminated if garbage and other food items which attract bears to camps or residences are eliminated. In some areas of Alaska, black bears are a traditional subsistence food. In the community of Huslia, for instance, hibernating bears are killed, cooked, and eaten by the men and boys of the community in a traditional dinner.

The best bear hunting areas are probably from the tidal areas in Prince William Sound southward through the panhandle of Alaska. In these areas, bears are spotted from boats as they forage on the beach. Early May through early June is usually the best time for such hunting. The pelts of spring black bears make beautiful trophies if taken before they start to rub.

If bear flesh is used for human food, it must be well-cooked as Alaska bears have been known to have trichinosis. This disease is transmitted by eating infected meat that is not cooked thoroughly.

Danger to humans: Bears are extremely powerful animals and potentially dangerous to humans. They are usually highly cautious and secretive, but if they have a food supply, they may defend it against all intruders. Every year, bears are found in Alaska's biggest cities — in downtown Juneau, Anchorage and Fairbanks. Encounters with humans, especially near garbage dumps and fish drying racks, frequently occur. Sows with cubs must always be respected. A rule of thumb is never to come between or near a mother bear and her young.

Normally, these bears snort in a characteristic way and move off. They have, however, attacked without apparent provocation. Several persons have been victims of these unprovoked attacks. In general, all bears should be considered as potentially dangerous and should be treated with respect. Black bears that appear unafraid of humans and will allow people to approach closely should be treated with utmost caution.



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Revised and reprinted 2008
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