



# Meet the American Black Bear

American black bears are adaptable, resourceful and highly intelligent, capable of solving complex problems, remembering what they learn, and passing on that knowledge to the next generation. Their innate curiosity helps them discover and exploit all possible food sources in their endless quest for calories.

## Where Black Bears Live

The American Black Bear (*Ursus americanus*) is found in most states, Canada and Mexico. Today more than 900,000 black bears live throughout North America, with about 450,000 black bears in the United States.

**Habitat:** Black bears live in a wide range of habitats, from arid deserts to dense forests; anywhere that offers abundant food, reliable water sources, good places to rest and hidden, protected sites for denning and rearing cubs.

**Home Range:** Black bears are typically not territorial; their home ranges often overlap. Male bears can range up to 300 square miles; females up to 50 square miles. Several females may live within the home range of an adult male.

The size of a bear's home range depends on habitat and available food sources; home ranges are smaller in areas

where high-quality natural foods are abundant and larger in areas where bears travel further to find food.

Natural disasters and widespread food shortages can force bears to travel well outside their established ranges. Young male bears may travel hundreds of miles when they leave their moms and go in search of a home range of their own.

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## A Bear's Natural Diet

**Bears Are Omnivores:** A bear's natural diet is 70–85% plant-based (berries, fruits, nuts, seeds, tender plants and grasses). The rest is protein-rich insects, small mammals and carrion. This mostly vegetarian diet requires bears to spend most of their time foraging. Bears are opportunistic and will take newborn deer, elk and moose when available.



From spring through late summer, a 250-pound bear needs about 3,000 to 3,500 calories per day. During the annual fall eat-a-thon (**hyperphagia**), bears can gain several pounds a day (20 to 100% of their summer weight), eating 15,000 to 20,000 calories or more each day preparing to hibernate.

## Why Black Bears Matter

Bears play key roles in nature's recycling and renewal program, and in human culture. Bears clean up carcasses and shred logs and aerate the soil hunting for insects. Their high-volume, high-fiber diet passes through their digestive system quickly, dispersing seeds and recycling nitrogen, phosphorus and other key terrestrial and aquatic nutrients many times each day as they move through their home range.

Bears and humans have been linked since prehistoric times. They are part of our folklore and ceremonies, reflected in our everyday language; feared and revered, respected and admired. Black bears are iconic symbols of our natural world.



## Physical Traits of Black Bears

**Colors:** Black bear is a species, not a color. *Ursus americanus* comes in more colors than any other North American mammal: black, brown, cinnamon, tan, blonde, gray, white, glacier blue and even a combination of colors. Cubs from a single litter can each be a different color.

Color variations are due to genetics and regional adaptation to conditions. Black bears in the East are predominantly black or black with a white chest blaze; further west, shades of brown dominate. An individual bear doesn't change colors each season, although a bear's coat may darken over time.

**Size/Weight:** A bear's normal weight varies throughout the year and is determined by many factors, including sex, age, condition, reproductive status, and quality and quantity of food. Every region has a range of normal weights. Contact your state wildlife agency for local weight ranges.

Bears with access to high-calorie food (natural or human) typically outweigh bears that must work harder for their food. Bears are normally at their heaviest just before hibernation. Bears lose 15–50% of their body weight during hibernation and are at their thinnest in early spring.

The size of a bear does not indicate sex: a large female bear can easily outweigh a small male; a juvenile male can be about the same size as an adult female.

**Sight:** Bears see in color, which helps them identify small food items such as berries. Their daytime vision is similar to humans; their night vision is very sharp and they can quickly detect movement.

**Smell:** A bear's nose is seven times more sensitive than a bloodhound's nose, or 2,100 times better than ours. No wonder bears can follow their noses to food more than a mile away.

**Hearing:** Bears have very acute hearing (about twice as good as humans) which helps them detect and avoid danger. They hear in all directions and at much lower frequencies than we do.

**Vocalizations:** Grunts, moans, huffs, snorts, teeth clacking, mom barking commands, cubs whining and humming contentedly are all natural vocalizations.



*Bears are very curious and will follow their powerful noses to anything that smells "interesting."*

**Agile Tongues:** Bears have long prehensile tongues designed for licking sap and extracting insects (termites, ants) from rotten logs and anthills, and flexible lips that are perfect for delicately picking berries.

**Strong:** Pound for pound, bears are much stronger than people, with heavy muscles, powerful shoulders and jaws, and big bones. An adult bear can shred logs, break open beehives, or flip over a 300-pound boulder.

**Flexible:** Bears might look clumsy, but they are actually very flexible. Bears have no collar bones; even a full-grown bear can easily fit through the average dog door.

**Built for Endurance:** Bears are built for both endurance and bursts of speed. A bear can easily walk 15 miles a day and sprint up to 35 mph for short distances. Bears enjoy the water and are good long-distance swimmers.

**Gait:** Bears walk with a flat-footed gait similar to humans that's a bit pigeon-toed. Except for the big toe being on the outside, a bear's hind paw print looks very much like human footprint.

**Paws & Claws:** Five non-retractable claws enable bears to be excellent climbers, diggers and rippers. Bears are dexterous and nimble enough to open unlocked doors and windows.



**Keeping Warm, Cooling Off:** A bear's coat of dense underfur and long guard hairs forms a highly efficient, insulating fur coat that traps body heat, repels rain and snow and keeps bears warm and dry. Since black bears can't sweat, they shed their underfur in the summer to prevent overheating and dissipate excess heat through their paws, faces, ears, nose and belly where fur is less dense. Bears will also cool off in water and seek out cool, shady places (under trees and porches).

### Lessons Last a Lifetime

*Cubs taught to forage and survive on natural foods grow up wild. Cubs taught to take advantage of human-provided food sources will continue this behavior when they go out on their own.*



## About Bear Cubs

An average of two to three cubs are born in January / February. Cubs weigh just 8–12 ounces when they are born in the den, blind and covered in fine fur. Mother bears continue to hibernate while cubs quickly gain weight nursing on milk that is 20–25% fat (milk from humans and cows has between 3–5% fat).

Cubs weigh anywhere from 4 to 8 pounds or more when mom leads them out of the den between late April and June. They spend their first year with mom learning how to survive. Cubs can weigh anywhere from 25 to 80 pounds by the time they are fully weaned in August. Cubs continue to gain weight during hyperphagia in the fall.

Cubs have sharp teeth and claws and are natural climbers and quick learners. Bears are excellent moms, and spend the spring, summer and fall teaching the cubs all the survival skills they need. Male bears play no part in raising their young.

Juvenile bears go out on their own when they are 15 to 16 months old; females often adopt part of their mom’s home range or move in next door; males need to find a new home range.

## The Life of Bears

**Naturally Shy:** Black bears in the wild are naturally shy, instinctively avoid people and typically flee or climb trees when confronted with danger. Adult bears generally lead solitary lives except during courting, although juveniles and adult males sometimes “play” together.

**Extremely Curious:** Innate curiosity helps bears discover and exploit all possible food sources in their endless quest for calories.

**Super Smart:** American black bears are persistent and creative problem-solvers. They can remember solutions they tried and apply the one that worked the next time they encounter a similar problem.

**Remarkable Memories:** Bears can remember specific locations for many years and spatial layouts over hundreds of miles. Their built-in GPS leads them back to anywhere they ever found food.

**Body Clocks:** Black bears are naturally most active early morning and late afternoon/early evening, nap off and on during the day, and sleep at night. But they are highly adaptable and will alter their schedule based on food availability and the presence of humans. Living around humans can cause bears to become nocturnal. During hyperphagia or while taking advantage of seasonal food sources, bears may be awake and foraging up to 20 hours a day.

**Hibernation** is primarily driven by dwindling food resources. It is a time of resting, recycling and repairing. Black bear hibernation is a biological marvel; scientists are studying how bears survive for up to six months without eating, drinking, urinating or defecating, or losing muscle mass or bone density.

A bear’s metabolism, heartbeat and respiration rate slows dramatically, but body temperature only drops about 12 degrees. Bears live off their fat reserves, recycle waste products, heal injuries and give birth while hibernating.

Bears hibernate longer in harsher climates. In mild climates with year-round food, bears (other than pregnant females) may just rest.



*Bears have remarkable memories and can easily find their way back to any reliable source of calories.*

**Courtship, Mating:** Bears normally reach reproductive age between three and six years old, and mate in early through mid-summer. Males roam throughout their home range, searching for receptive females. Cubs from a single litter can have different fathers, which helps keep the gene pool diverse. Females raising cubs typically mate every other year.

**Pregnancy:** Bears have a unique two-step pregnancy. Eggs are fertilized during mating, but fertilized eggs (blastocysts) don't implant in the womb until late fall. Eggs only implant and develop if the bear has gained enough weight to sustain mother and developing cubs for up to six months without food or water; if not, eggs are reabsorbed.

**Life Span:** On average, a wild bear can live between 12 and 15 years, with female bears typically living longer than males. Bears in protected natural areas outlive bears living in close proximity to humans. Availability and quality of food and habitat also impact longevity.

Adult bears have few natural predators. Bear cubs can be preyed on by coyotes, mountain lions, wolves, male bears and other predators. Wild bears are not generally prone to disease, although mange has been found in some wild bear populations. Major causes of adult bear mortality are hunting, vehicle collisions and bears killed due to human-bear conflicts. Bears also die from ingesting antifreeze and other chemicals, fishing hooks, wire, plastic bags and trash.

## How People Impact Black Bears

### Quality Bear Habitat Is Shrinking

As the human population of the United States continues to expand, bear habitat continues to shrink. Clearing land, and building homes, roads, fences and other infrastructure also impacts the accessibility and quality of habitat, which in turn affects the number of bears it can support. As bears must travel further for critical resources and denning sites, vehicle collisions rise.

### Proximity to People Can Endanger Bears

Bears that live close to people must learn to tolerate our presence as they go about foraging, rearing young and generally being bears. This learned indifference is a necessary survival skill, not necessarily a sign of conflict. However, bears that have become comfortable around people can also be less inclined to flee. No matter how indifferent they seem, these bears remain powerful wild animals; they are in no sense of the word tame.

## Be BearWise. Keep Bears Wild.

Black bears proved long ago they can coexist with people. Now it is up to people to prove they can coexist with bears.

### People Food Is Bad for Bears

Bears that have learned to depend on calorie-dense, regularly available, human-provided food sources such as garbage, birdseed/nectar, pet/livestock feed, fruit trees (and more) can:

- Often outweigh bears eating only natural bear foods.
- Mature and have cubs at an earlier age.
- Give birth to more cubs (4 to 6).
- Hibernate for shorter periods of time, if at all.
- Develop less efficient guts, which makes it harder for them to digest their natural foods.
- Suffer from tooth decay and age more quickly.
- Become aggressive in their pursuit and defense of easy calories.

*Chocolate and other foods contain theobromine, which is toxic to bears and can cause serious illness and heart failure.*



Visit [BearWise.org](https://www.bearwise.org) to learn more about bears, how to be BearWise, and to download free fact sheets and order outreach materials, including *Living With Bears Handbook*.

