

Black Bear

(*Ursus americanus*)

Kingdom: *Animalia*

Phylum: *Chordata*

Class: *Mammalia*

Order: *Carnivora*

Family: *Ursidae*



NAMES: A female bear is called a 'sow' and a male bear is called a 'boar'. Because of this some people think bears are related to pigs, but bears are not related to pigs. A group of bears is referred to as a 'sloth of bears'.

COLOR: Black Bears are not always black. They can be black, brown, and occasionally blonde or even white. Some black bears have a white chest patch.

ADULT WEIGHT: Most wild male black bears weigh between 125 and 500 pounds, while females generally weigh between 90 and 300 pounds. Their weight depends upon their age, the season of the year, and how much food is available. The heaviest wild male black bear known weighed 880 pounds and the heaviest known female weighed 520 pounds. Black bears in captivity may exceed these records.

ADULT LENGTH: Black bears can grow to be from 50 to 80 inches long, nose to tail, with males being larger than females.

NUMBER of CUBS: The number of cubs in a litter is generally 2 in the western United States and 3 in the eastern United States. Parts of Pennsylvania have excellent bear habitat and a few litters of 6 cubs have been reported there.

MATING SEASON: Black bears generally mate between late May and early July.

BIRTH: Cubs are born in January or early February. Cubs weigh 1/2 to 1 pound at birth.

FALL WEIGHT of CUBS: By their first fall the cubs may weigh from 15 pounds to more than 165 pounds, depending on food supply.

PARENTAL CARE: Cubs usually stay with their mother for 17 months. Mother bears stop traveling with their cubs when the mothers are ready to mate again.

AGE at FIRST PREGNANCY: Typically female black bears first produce cubs when they are between 3 and 7 years old. Depending on food supply they may mate as young as 2 or as old as 11.

INTERVAL BETWEEN LITTERS of CUBS: Once females give birth, they generally have cubs every 2 years after that unless food is scarce.

VISION: Bears see in color and have good vision close-up. Their distance vision is not known.

HEARING & SMELLING: Bears can hear and smell much better than humans.

INTELLIGENCE: Black Bears have a large brain compared to their size and are one of the more intelligent mammals. They have excellent long-term memory.

SOUNDS: Black bears make a variety of grunts when they are relaxed. When they are frightened they make a loud blowing noise. They use their “voice” to express a range of emotions. Black bears do not threaten by growling.

SWIMMING DISTANCE: Black bears are good swimmers. They can swim at least a mile and a half in fresh water. One bear swam 9 miles in the Gulf of Mexico.

RUNNING SPEED: Bears can run uphill and downhill and on flat ground. Lean bears can run faster than 30 miles per hour. Fat bears in their winter coats overheat and tire quickly when running.

DAILY ACTIVITY PERIOD: Most bears become active a half-hour before sunrise, take a nap or two during the day, and bed down for the night an hour or two after sunset. Some bears reverse the pattern and become nocturnal (active at night) to avoid people.

PREFERRED FOODS: Black bears eat a mix of fruit, nuts, acorns, insects, succulent greens, and meat.

HIBERNATION: Black bears may hibernate up to 7 months in the north where food is scarce between September and April. Some do not hibernate all in the south where food is available year-round. Bears that must hibernate for long periods reduce their metabolism more than do bears that hibernate in the south.

LIFESPAN: Black bears can live 21-33 years or more if they are not killed.

CAUSES of DEATH: Very few adult bears outside of national parks die of natural causes. Nearly all adult bears die from human-related causes. Most

are eventually shot and a few are killed by vehicles. The average age of death in unprotected populations is three to five years of age. Bears less than 17 months old sometimes die from starvation, predation, falls from trees, getting hit by vehicles, and other accidental causes. Very few bears die of disease.

RANGE: Black bears mostly live in forests with low human populations. They live as far south as Florida and northern Mexico and as far north as tree line in Alaska and Canada. Some black bears have moved into areas of open tundra in Labrador where there are no longer any grizzly bears. People are becoming more tolerant of black bears as they learn more about them. This has made it possible for bears to live more closely among people in places where bears were once feared and killed.

IDEAL HABITAT: Black bears like large forests with many different kinds of fruits and nuts. Small sunny openings within the forest provide many kinds of food for the bears. Lowlands and wetlands are important sources of succulent (tender and juicy) vegetation. Streams and woodland pools are important for drinking and cooling. Mothers with cubs like large trees (over 20 inches in diameter) with furrowed bark (like white pines or hemlocks) for bedding sites. These trees are safest for small cubs to climb.

GREATEST MISCONCEPTION: One of the greatest misconceptions is that mother black bears are likely to defend their cubs against people. They usually do not. While grizzly bear mothers can be dangerous, no human deaths are known from black bear mothers defending cubs. Researchers often capture screaming black bear cubs in the presence of their mothers, and no attacks have been reported.