

NEW YORK STATE

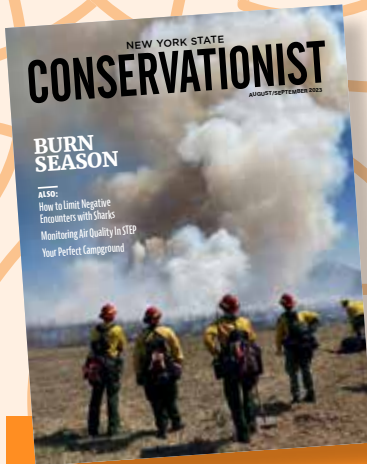
# CONSERVATIONIST



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## Black Bear BASICS



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**In this issue:** Students will learn about black bears, including the basics of their life history. Students will also learn how to be BearWise® and learn about some of the ways that the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) studies and manages them.

Cover photo: American black bear



# WHAT IS A BEAR?

Nearly everyone is familiar with bears, especially some of the well-known bears like Smokey Bear, Paddington Bear, Winnie-the-Pooh, Baloo, and Yogi, but how much do you actually know about real bears?

Bears belong to the Order Carnivora, carnivores or meat-eating animals. Bears are classified as part of the group of carnivores known as the dog-like carnivores, which also includes animals like dogs, coyotes, wolves, foxes, raccoons, weasels, badgers, otters, fishers, wolverines, seals, and walruses. However, most bears are considered to be omnivores, as they primarily eat large amounts of plant matter, nuts, berries, fruits, insects, eggs, and even things like honey!

Bears are in the Family Ursidae, and within that family, there are eight species of bears found around the world: polar bear, brown bear (which includes grizzly bear and Kodiak bear), American black bear, spectacled bear (also known as the Andean bear), Asian (Himalayan) black bear, sloth bear, sun bear, and giant panda. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature lists six of the eight species of bears as threatened with extinction in some or all of their ranges. Only the brown bear and American

black bear are not at risk. In North America, we have polar bears, brown bears, and American black bears; in New York State, we only have black bears.

Bears can range in size from as small as four feet long and 60 pounds in weight (the sun bear) to over eight feet long and weighing more than 1,000 pounds (the polar bear). All bears have nonretractable claws, like other dog-like carnivores, while cats can retract their claws, meaning pull them inside their toes. Bears have short tails, erect, rounded ears, thick coats of fur, and long muzzles. Most bears have average eyesight and hearing, but they have an excellent sense of smell, which is their primary way of finding food. Most bears are solitary much of the time, meaning that they spend their time alone, except for female bears when they are raising their young. Most bears live around 25 to 30 years in the wild but have been known to live as long as 50 years in captivity.

polar bear



Andean bear



Asian black bear



sun bear



brown bear



American black bear



sloth bear



giant panda

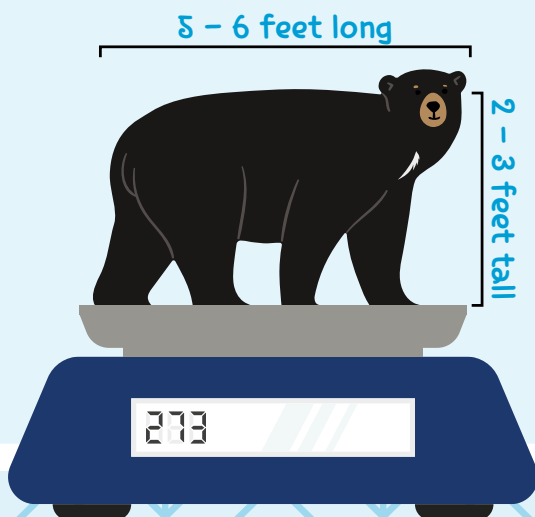


Smokey Bear

# MEET THE BLACK BEAR



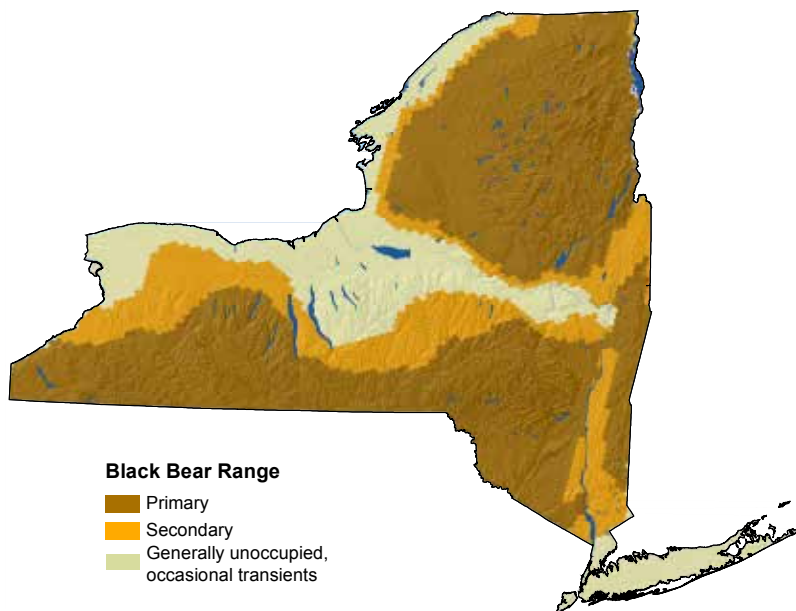
In New York State, our only species of bear is the American black bear, *Ursus americanus*, which we will refer to as black bears. Black bears are approximately five to six feet long, standing two to three feet tall at the shoulders. Adult males usually weigh from 130 to 350 pounds, but can weigh as much as 600 pounds, and adult females usually range from 90 to 175 pounds. As their name implies, most black bears have black fur, although some may be cinnamon in color, and many have a white blaze on their chest.



American black bears are found only in North America, ranging from Canada throughout the United States and into northern and central Mexico. They can be found in forested areas, swamps, and in mountains. In New York State, 45 percent of their population is found in northern New York, 45 percent in southeastern New York, and 10 percent in central and western New York. Although historically found in wilderness areas, they are becoming more common in less wild locations, agricultural areas, and even urban places. Black bears have become well established in the Tug Hill region, Hudson Valley, and across the Southern Tier, and it is estimated that there are between 6,000 to 8,000 black bears in the parts of New York State where hunting bears is allowed.

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Black bears are the second largest mammal in New York State, after the moose. They are excellent climbers and swimmers and can run as fast as 25 to 30 miles per hour over short distances! Black bears are very intelligent animals and will often return to the same locations again and again if they find that they are good sources of food.

Male black bears have home ranges that may be more than 100 square miles, which will often overlap with the ranges of multiple females. Mating season peaks during June and July. Females normally give birth every other year, although some may go as many as three or four years between pregnancies. Females give birth to two or three cubs in January or February. Cubs are born naked and blind, and stay in their dens throughout the winter months, nursing from their hibernating mother.



Mama?

## Peek Inside a Bear Den!



During the summer months, black bears spend most of their time actively feeding, putting on a layer of fat that they will live off of during the winter months. As the weather turns colder, they will locate a den to spend the winter in, and enter a stage known as hibernation. Black bears will often dig a den beneath a fallen tree, in a hollow log, or anywhere else that provides shelter. While in hibernation, their heart rate, metabolism (chemical reactions in the body that change food to energy), respiration (breathing) and body temperature decrease, and they can go up to 100 days or so without eating, drinking, or even going to the bathroom. Females will wake during hibernation to give birth to their cubs, and resume hibernating afterwards. Black bears emerge from hibernation in the spring, leaving their dens to search for food. Although most active at dawn and dusk, black bears can be seen during any time of the day, especially when they first emerge from hibernation and need to replace the energy that they used while hibernating.

Cubs are weaned (stop drinking milk) from their mothers at around six to eight months old but remain with their mothers through their second winter, when they leave to find their own home range.



BECOME

# BearWise®



Black bears are opportunistic feeders, and their search for food sometimes leads them into human spaces. Extended dry periods can also make natural food sources harder to find, and lead bears to seek out unnatural sources of food, including bird seed, pet food, and trash. Intentionally feeding bears is illegal! Feeding bears is bad for bears - their natural foraging habits and behavior can be changed. Usually solitary, bears that seek out unnatural food sources can be concentrated in areas causing stress, injuries from physical conflicts with other bears or humans, and the spread of diseases. Often when feeding on garbage or camping supplies, bears will eat unhealthy items, such as soap, shaving cream, insect repellent, food packaging, etc.

## BearWise Basics:



DEC is a member of the national BearWise program, which is dedicated to helping people prevent human-bear conflicts and live responsibly with black bears. Here are some BearWise safety tips you can practice at home.

- Never feed or approach bears;
- Secure food, garbage, and recycling;
- Remove bird feeders when bears are active;
- Never leave pet food outdoors;
- Clean and store grills and smokers; and
- Alert neighbors to bear activity.



## BLACK BEAR Research and Management

Black bears were once limited to isolated populations in the most mountainous areas of New York State, but their populations and ranges have been steadily increasing. As black

bear populations increase and more people choose to live and recreate in areas occupied by bears, human-bear conflicts have the potential to increase. Managing bear populations has become







Black bears are naturally afraid of humans, but can become aggressive if they are startled, approached, or become used to human-provided food sources. Remember, when you are out hiking, camping, fishing, or taking part in other outdoor activities, you are in bear habitat. To keep people, pets, and bears safe, you should always follow the BearWise outdoor safety tips, including:

- Stay alert and together;
- Set up camp away from dense cover;
- Cook as far from your tent as possible;
- Leave no trash or food scraps;
- Know before you go—local rules and regulations vary. Use of bear-resistant food containers is required for campers in the Eastern High Peaks Wilderness of the Adirondack Park;
- Never keep food, coolers, or scented items in tents or vehicles when camping. If car-camping, store coolers or scented items securely in either the trunk of a car or the cab of a truck, and keep them out of sight;
- Never leave food unattended;
- Know what to do if you see a bear; and
- Carry bear spray and know how to use it.



To learn more about all the BearWise Basics and BearWise Safety Tips visit the BearWise website: [BearWise.org](https://www.bearwise.org)

increasingly important, and DEC has an active black bear management plan in place. DEC's black bear management plan seeks to maintain bear populations at acceptable levels, minimize human-bear conflicts, and promote hunting as an effective way of managing bear populations, much in the way that it does for white-tailed deer populations.

DEC scientists have been studying black bears for years. DEC collects

information from the public about black bear sightings, bear conflicts, and the status of the population through a variety of methods including mail surveys, reports made on the [iSeeMammals.org](https://www.iseemammals.org) website, data collected by hunters and taxidermists, and periodically through specific research projects. Using all of this information, scientists are able to develop plans to manage black bear

populations and reduce the likelihood of conflicts between humans and bears.

Remember, black bears are intelligent and learn from experience. If an activity results in food, they will likely repeat that activity. If an encounter with a human is negative, they learn to avoid humans.

# What's Wrong with This Picture?

Bears can smell food from miles away.



**Find 11 things that will attract hungry, curious bears!**

Answers on DEC website [www.dec.ny.gov/education/100637.html](http://www.dec.ny.gov/education/100637.html) or email [KidsConservationist@dec.ny.gov](mailto:KidsConservationist@dec.ny.gov) to get a copy

BearWise® Created by Bear Biologists, Supportd by State Wildlife Agencies; ©2022; Artwork by Evelyn Kirkaldy



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## ***Conservationist for Kids*** **Supplement for Classroom Teachers – Black Bear Basics** **October 2023**

This issue of *Conservationist for Kids* introduces students to general information about bears, and focuses on the species found here in New York State—the American black bear (*Ursus americanus*). Students will learn about the different types of bears found around the world, the basics of bear natural history, how to practice the BearWise® basics to live safely around black bears, and some of the ways that scientists at the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) research, study, and manage black bears. The back page of this issue features a coloring page that asks students to look for the things in the picture that could lead to problems with black bears. The back page of this teacher supplement contains the answer page, to enable you to facilitate a conversation with your students.

### **Online Resources\***

DEC Black Bear - [www.dec.ny.gov/animals/6960.html](http://www.dec.ny.gov/animals/6960.html)

DEC Learn to Live Responsibly with Black Bears by Becoming BearWise -

[www.dec.ny.gov/animals/6995.html](http://www.dec.ny.gov/animals/6995.html)

BearWise - <https://BearWise.org/>

Bear Conservation - [www.bearconservation.org.uk/](http://www.bearconservation.org.uk/)

Bear With Us Centre for Bears - <https://bearwithus.org/>

North American Bear Center - <https://bear.org/>

### **Books\***

Anderson, Margaret; Field, Nancy; Stephenson, Karen. *Discovering Black Bears*. Dog-Eared Publications, 2007.

Animal Reads. *All Things Bears for Kids*. Admore Publishing, 2022.

Fergus, Charles. *Bears: Wild Guide (Wild Guide Series)*. Stackpole Books, 2005.

Figart, Frances. *Mabel Meets a Black Bear*. Great Smoky Mountains Association, 2023.

Hodge, Deborah. *Bears: Polar Bears, Black Bears and Grizzly Bears*. Kids Can Press, 1996.

National Geographic Kids. *National Geographic Readers: Bears*. National Geographic Kids, 2016.

Tekiela, Stan. *Bears of North America: Black Bears, Brown Bears, and Polar Bears (Favorite Wildlife)*. Adventure Publications, 2023.

*\*Please note, the listing of websites and books is not to be considered an endorsement, as not all have been reviewed by the editor.*

***Conservationist for Kids* and an accompanying teacher supplement are distributed free of charge to 4th-grade classes throughout New York State three times per school year (fall, winter, and spring).** If you would like to be added to or removed from the distribution list, need to update information, or if you have questions or comments, please e-mail the editor at: [KidsConservationist@dec.ny.gov](mailto:KidsConservationist@dec.ny.gov) or call 518-402-8047. Limited quantities of some back issues are available upon request. The full archives can be found online at: [www.dec.ny.gov/education/100637.html](http://www.dec.ny.gov/education/100637.html)



Department of  
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Conservation



# How many things did you spot that would attract bears?

Add your numbers from the other side.

# \_\_\_ **Pie is cooling in the open window and smells SOOOO good.**

A bear could swipe it right off the windowsill or walk in the open door and help itself.

# \_\_\_ **Ripe fruit is easy pickings.**

Whether it's on the tree or on the ground, ripe fruit smells delicious. Pick fruit before it ripens and pick up any on the ground.

Electric fencing keeps bears away from chickens, beehives, fruit trees, compost & more.

# \_\_\_ **Nobody is watching the grill.**

Does anything smell better than meat cooking on the grill? Not to a bear! Don't leave food where a bear can reach it and be sure to clean the grill when you're done.

# \_\_\_ **Garbage is easy to grab.**

Garbage smells stinky to us but great to a bear. To keep bears out, store trash in a locked garage, sturdy shed, trash corral or locked bear-resistant garbage can.

# \_\_\_ **Door and window are open.**

Open doors and windows are open invitations to bears. Keep doors and windows closed **and** locked so bears aren't tempted to drop in.

# \_\_\_ **Bird feeder has nutritious birdseed.**

Feed birds only when bears aren't active. Visit our website to learn how to attract birds, not bears.

Even grown-up bears can quickly scoot up trees to pick fruit or empty bird feeders.

# \_\_\_ **Pet bowl is full of food.**

Pet food is full of calories. It's best to feed pets inside. If you have to feed them outside, bring bowls in as soon as they're done eating and then clean up the area.

# \_\_\_ **Bone meal and fish fertilizer are used to grow plants.**

People think bone meal and fish fertilizer smell yucky ... bears think they smell like dinner. Both can attract all sorts of critters who will dig up your garden.

# \_\_\_ **Chicken is roaming around.**

Chicken dinner goes great with pie! *Bonus:* Is that chicken feed on the ground? Bears love all kinds of animal feed.

# \_\_\_ **Beehive is unprotected.**

A beehive full of honey makes a sweet treat for a hungry bear.

# \_\_\_ **Compost bin is overflowing.**

Meat and fish leftovers don't belong in compost; they will attract lots of critters (bugs and skunks!) including bears.



## Be BearWise at Home

Visit [BearWise.org](http://BearWise.org) to learn how you can help keep people safe & bears wild

