

H eavy-set, formidable-looking animals, wild black bears are one of New York State's largest land mammals.

Though frequently thought of as aggressive and menacing, they are ordinarily very shy, elusive, secretive creatures. In fact, although common in most of the state, black bears try to avoid people and so are seldom seen by many.

DESCRIPTION

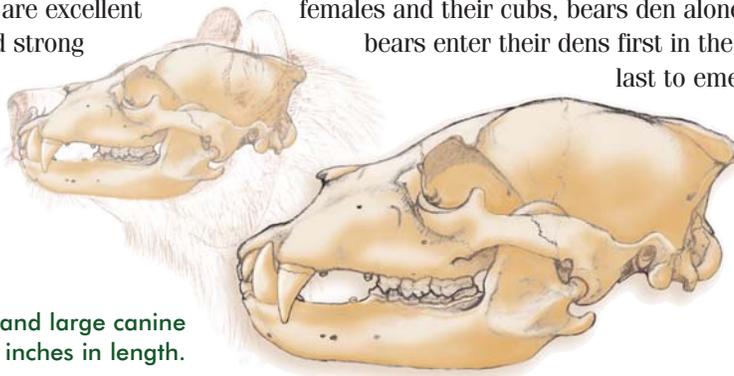
Native to North America, black bears (*Ursus americanus*) occur in Alaska, Canada, northern Mexico and most of the lower forty-eight states. They prefer wooded areas, occurring in and around mature forests. Black bears also do well in somewhat open and developed areas as long as adequate cover and an abundance of food are available. They are intelligent and curious and spend a great deal of time exploring for food. Solitary animals, they usually live alone, except for females with cubs and in feeding areas with an abundance of food. Adult bears have large home ranges, with males traveling up to 100 square miles, and females traveling 25 to 50 square miles.

In New York, black bears are second only to moose in size. Adult bears average 2½-3 feet tall at the shoulder and 6 feet long from their nose to the end of their short tail. Some individuals can reach weights of 600 pounds or more, but most adult bears are smaller, with males averaging 300 pounds and females averaging 160 pounds.

While black bears exhibit different color phases, most bears in New York are jet black, except for a light brown snout and an occasional white chest blaze. Once in a while, a brown or cinnamon-colored black bear is spotted.

Black bears have adequate vision, better hearing, and an incredibly keen sense of smell, which is their primary sense. This acute sense of smell enables them to accurately locate food, occasionally from as far away as one mile. Their hindquarters are heavily muscled, enabling them to run up to 30 mph for short distances. They are excellent climbers, using their large claws and strong legs to quickly hoist themselves up trees, usually circling the trunk as they ascend. They are also excellent swimmers and do not hesitate to cross lakes or rivers. Long-lived, they can survive for 30 to 40 years.

Black bears have powerful jaws and large canine teeth that may exceed 1½ inches in length.



FOOD AND FAMILY LIFE

New York's largest carnivore, black bears are primarily vegetarians, eating an amazing amount of small items such as succulent plants (like skunk cabbage), grasses, sedges, clover, insects (especially ants and bees), berries, fruits, nuts, mast (acorns and beechnuts), and plant roots. However, bears are opportunists and will eat whatever is readily available, including amphibians, reptiles, small mammals, fish, carrion and garbage. In addition, they will also avail themselves of human foods (almost everything from barbecued chicken to freeze dried meals and trail mix), bird seed (especially sunflower seeds), suet, pet food, agricultural crops (such as corn, oats or honey) and occasionally livestock.

During winter, when food is scarce, black bears find a den and basically sleep away the cold months. A den can be a crevice between or under boulders, a hollow tree or log, or under roots or a brushpile. Occasionally a bear may "den" unprotected on the forest floor with little or no shelter from the weather. Unlike a true hibernator, the denning black bear maintains a near-normal body temperature which allows them to quickly react to any situation. True hibernators, such as woodchucks, are very slow to react during hibernation because they must first warm their bodies up. During the four to six months that bears are in their dens, they will not eat, drink, urinate or defecate.

Denning is triggered by the length of daylight, the amount of the bear's body fat and the availability of food. Except for females and their cubs, bears den alone. Typically, female bears enter their dens first in the late fall and are the last to emerge from dens in

spring. About half of all adult females will be pregnant during any given year. At the end of January or early February, females give birth to between one and six (average-two to three), half-pound blind cubs. Females with cubs may not emerge from their dens until April or May, when the cubs will weigh around 10 pounds.

Adult female bears without cubs start breeding in late May or June. Breeding may occur in July, August, or possibly even September. Females breed for the first time between the ages of 2 and 5 and then every other year in two-year cycles. Even with the long breeding season, delayed implantation enables all cubs to be born at about the same time.

Cubs are inquisitive and often wrestle with each other. They stay with the adult females until they are about 1½ years old. Most yearlings average 100 pounds or more, but their size can vary greatly depending on the number of bears in an area and the amount of available food.

Black bears make a variety of sounds, including a whine, cough, snort, sniff, bawl, growl and woof.

MANAGING NEW YORK BLACK BEARS

Observing a black bear in the wild can be a thrill. For many, simply knowing wild bears exist in the state or seeing their tracks or sign (such as claw marks on tree trunks) is enough. However, some people feel apprehension because

of a bear's size and strength, while others are annoyed by the damage some bears cause to crops and private property. Balancing these sometimes conflicting human desires and the requirements for healthy bear populations is a constant challenge for wildlife managers.

At one time, the black bear was considered an unacceptable nuisance in New York State. During the 1800s, bears were completely unprotected and in the early 1890s a bounty was offered. This, coupled with habitat loss because of the clearing of forests, caused bear populations to decline. Today, however, through active management and increased forest land, our bear populations are very healthy and benefit from a delicate coexistence with people. Recently, DEC solicited public input regarding black bears in the state. This resulted in several recommendations, including expanding areas open to bear hunting to reduce problems caused by bears, and to increase hunting to control populations. In addition, DEC is considering reopening some bear hunting areas in southern and western N.Y., perhaps as soon as this fall. Such actions will help ensure bear populations remain healthy, and at the same time will lessen human-bear conflicts. In the meantime, almost all of us can help reduce conflicts by preventing the habituation of bears who access our foods, garbage or bird seed.

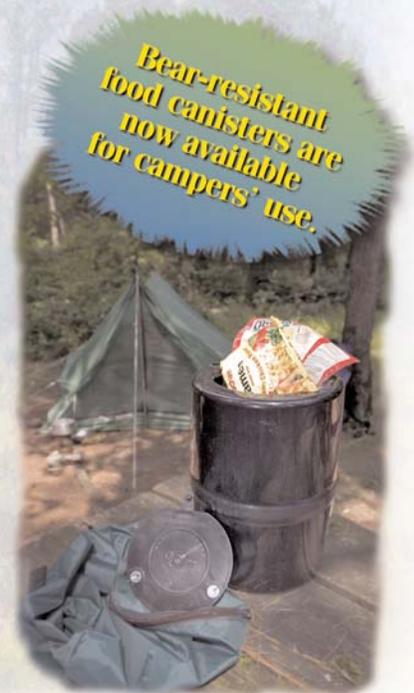
Visit DEC's website at www.dec.state.ny.us for more information on black bears in New York State.

Avoiding Human/Bear Conflicts

Bears normally have a natural fear or wariness of people. Unfortunately, bears that associate people with food, including garbage and bird seed, can lose that fear and become habituated to people. Habituated bears are far more likely to be involved in problems, such as destruction of property in their quest to access food. Although many feel that the best solution is to relocate habituated bears, that is seldom effective in reducing or eliminating these problems.

Black bears are highly intelligent and learn by association. For example, bears have learned to associate backpacks and ropes in trees as possible sources of food. They will chew through any vertical rope they find and rip open backpacks, hoping to obtain an easy meal. In some areas, such as the Adirondacks, the encounters have become so numerous that DEC has proposed a regulation requiring overnight campers in the Eastern Adirondack High Peaks (beginning in 2005) to use an approved bear-resistant canister to store all food, garbage, toiletries and other items attractive to bears. Other associations by bears looking for food include bird feeders (and the posts holding the feeders), coolers, dumpsters, garbage bags or cans and occasionally cars and buildings.

The best way to minimize human-bear conflicts is to teach people how to reduce or eliminate the availability of unnatural foods. Unfortunately, some people deliberately feed bears by making food available near roads, campgrounds or homes. This leads to problems and is illegal. Remember—remove the food and you remove the bear.



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