

Connecticut Department of Energy & Environmental Protection

BLACK BEAR *Ursus americanus*

Black Bear Sightings



Background Information

Black bears are impressive animals. Even a long-distance glimpse of one foraging in a woodland is an unforgettable experience for most outdoor enthusiasts. However, glimpsing a bear in Connecticut was once unlikely because bears were extirpated from the state by the mid-1800s. Since then, bears have made a comeback. Their return is due, in part, to the regrowth of forestland throughout the region following the abandonment of farms during the late 1800s. Beginning in the 1980s, the DEP Wildlife Division had evidence of a resident black bear population. Since then, annual sighting reports have increased dramatically, indicating a rapid increase in the bear population. With the number of bears increasing in the state, it is important for residents to learn the facts about black bears and how to coexist with them.

Description

The black bear is a stocky animal with short, thick legs. It is the smallest North American bear. In Connecticut, adult males, or boars, normally weigh from 150 to 450 pounds, while females, or sows, weigh from 110 to 250 pounds. Yearlings weigh 45 to 100 pounds. Adults are 5 to 6 feet long.

The black bear's coat is typically glossy black or brownish black, except for the muzzle, which is tan. There is sometimes a small, white patch on the chest. In western North America some black bears are brown or cinnamon. Black bears have 5 toes with large claws on all feet. Bear tracks somewhat resemble human tracks, but the front feet are shorter than the rear. A bear's tail is short, from 3 to 5 inches long. The sexes are similar in appearance, although males are usually larger.

Habitat and Diet

Black bear habitat is forestland, usually with deciduous and coniferous trees, as well as streams, swamps, and rock ledges. Bears prefer areas with thick understory vegetation and abundant food resources. Mature forests provide soft and hard mast (e.g., acorns) in late summer and fall.

Wetlands are particularly important in spring when emerging plants are one of the few available foods. Bears are omnivorous; they eat grasses, forbs, fruits, nuts, and berries. They also will seek insects (particularly ants and bees), scavenge carrion, and raid bird feeders and garbage cans. Bears occasionally will prey on small mammals, deer, and livestock.



Life History

Breeding occurs during summer, usually in late June or early July. During this time, males travel extensively in search of females. The age when sows first produce cubs is related to the available food supply, but most begin to reproduce at age 3 or 4 and continue to have young every 2 years. Bears do not form long-lasting bonds, so the males may mate with more than one female during the breeding season. Fighting may occur between rival males as well as between males and unreceptive females.

Young are born in the den during January or February and are blind, toothless, and covered with fine hair. Cubs weigh 6 to 12 ounces at birth. Litter sizes range from 1 to 4 cubs, with litters of 2 or 3 being most common. After giving birth, the sow usually continues her winter rest while the cubs are awake and nursing. Only females rear the young. Cubs are weaned when they are about 7 months old and will remain with the female until the second summer of their lives. Then, the young bears, especially the males, may travel great distances in search of their own territories. Yearling females frequently settle near their mother's home range. Young bears are often forced into less preferred habitat.

Interesting Facts

The black bear is an intelligent animal with keen senses of smell and hearing. It can detect the slightest aroma of food, which may lead the bear to campsites and near homes. Odor from carelessly stored food and garbage can lure bears long distances. Black bears travel and feed primarily at night, but can be active any time of the day. Climatic factors, such as drought, may result in a food shortage, causing bears to travel many miles in search of food.

Black bears are generally shy and secretive and usually fearful of humans. However, if they regularly find food near houses and areas of human activity, they can lose their fear of humans. Unlike grizzly bears, black bears are seldom aggressive toward humans.

Females with cubs tend to have restricted home ranges which average 5 to 7 square miles in Connecticut, while males move about widely in home ranges of 12 to 60 square miles. The size of a home range varies geographically and often depends on the quality of habitat. Most ranges are used by more than one bear, but specific areas are rarely used at the same time. There can be some broad overlap between male and female ranges. In their home territories, bears may mark

trees (called "bear trees") along their travel routes by clawing and biting the bark. Black bears are good tree climbers and strong swimmers. They also can run up to 35 miles per hour.

Black bears are not classified as true hibernators but their body temperature is lowered and heart rate slowed during winter denning. Denning enables bears to overcome unfavorable weather conditions and lack of food during winter. Denning bears do not eat, drink, urinate, or defecate. However, they will usually wake up if disturbed during their winter dormancy. Bears commonly den under fallen trees or in brush piles, but varied sites are used, including rocky ledges. Most dens are lined with leaves, grass, or rotted wood. In Connecticut, most bears den from late November through mid-March. Females tend to remain in the den for a longer period of time than males.

Bear Management

As Connecticut's bear population continues to increase, more bears, particularly young bears, will be seen near residential areas. The DEP's response will depend on the specifics of each bear situation. The mere presence of a bear does not necessitate its removal. In most cases, if left alone, the bear will make its way to a more natural habitat. Removing food attractants, such as bird feeders, reduces the chance that bears will go near homes. The DEP seldom relocates bears. An exception may be made to remove a bear in an urban location when there is little likelihood that it can leave safely on its own and when the bear is in a position where it can be safely immobilized. DEP Tranquilizing Teams, consisting of Environmental Conservation Police officers and wildlife biologists, are trained and equipped to immobilize wildlife. Bears cannot be relocated to another state because no other state allows it. Bears that have persistent, serious, negative behavior, such as killing protected livestock or entering buildings, may have to be destroyed.

As bears become more regular residents of Connecticut towns, it is important that people learn to adapt to the presence of bears and take measures to avoid damage and problems. **If people do not take precautions, problem behavior by bears can increase, possibly leading to bears being removed or destroyed.**

Living with Bears

Much of Connecticut's landscape is now forested and is suitable for black bears. The rapid increase in the bear population between the 1980s and early 2000s is expected to continue. As the bear population expands, interactions between humans and bears will increase. People should learn what to do if they see a bear and how to avoid unnecessary conflicts by keeping food away from bears.

If you see a bear:

- *Observe it from a distance.*
- *Advertise your presence by shouting and waving your arms or walk slowly away.*
- *Never attempt to feed or attract bears.*
- *Report bear sightings to the Wildlife Division, at 860-424-3011.*

Bears near your home

In wilderness settings bears usually avoid people. But food attractants near homes can cause them to grow habituated to humans and disturbances, such as dogs and other noises. Bears are

attracted by bird feeders, garbage, outdoor pet food, compost piles, fruit trees, and berry-producing shrubs.

To avoid attracting bears:

- Remove bird feeders from late March through November. If a bear visits a bird feeder in winter, remove the feeder.
- Wait until the morning of collection before bringing out trash. Add a few capfuls of ammonia to trash bags and garbage cans to mask food odors. Keep trash bags in a container with a tight lid and store in a garage or shed.
- Do not leave pet food outside overnight. Store livestock food in airtight containers.
- Do not put meats or sweet-smelling fruit rinds in compost piles. Lime can be sprinkled on the compost pile to reduce the smell and discourage bears.
- Thoroughly clean grills after use or store in a garage or shed.
- Never intentionally feed bears. Bears that associate food with people may become aggressive and dangerous. This may lead to personal injury, property damage, and the need to destroy problem animals.
- Encourage your neighbors to take similar precautions.

If you see a bear on your property you can either leave the bear alone and wait for it to leave or make loud noises from a safe distance to attempt to scare the bear away. After the bear leaves the property, remove anything that may have attracted it to the area.

Bears seen while hiking or camping

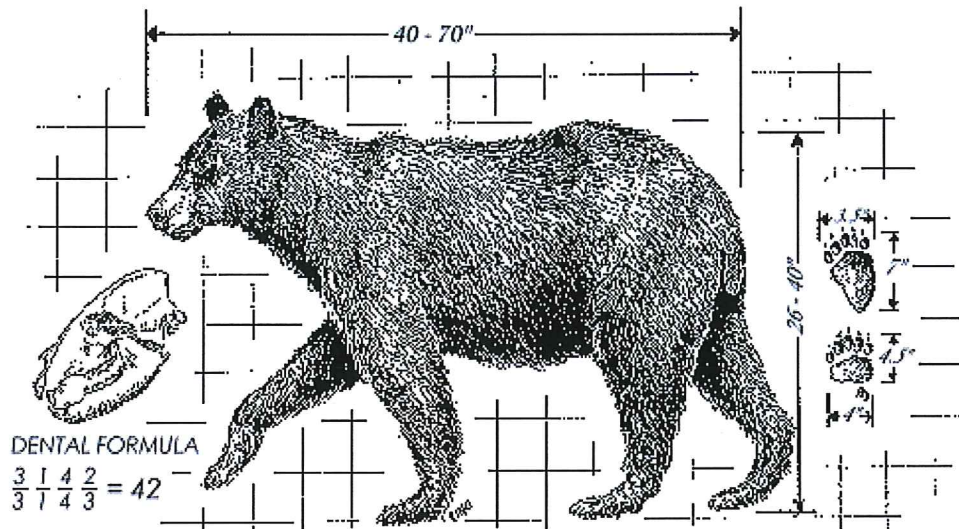
Black bear attacks on humans are exceptionally rare. In most hiking areas, bears normally leave once they have sensed a human. However, at campsites and campgrounds bears can be attracted by poorly stored food and garbage. If you see a bear when hiking or camping, make your presence known by making noise and waving your arms. If you surprise a bear at close range, walk away slowly while facing the bear. Do not run. Try to stay calm as you make your retreat. Black bears will sometimes "bluff charge" to within a few feet of you when they feel threatened. If this happens, stand your ground and shout at the bear. Do not climb a tree because black bears are excellent tree climbers. Make sure your dog is on a leash and under control.

Sometimes bears are attracted to food that is prepared outside. Do not cook near your tent and do not store food inside your tent. Instead, keep your food in a vehicle or use a rope to suspend it 10 or more feet off the ground and at least 6 feet away from tree trunks. Even clothes that you have cooked in should be stored out of a bear's reach.

Bears, livestock, pets, and beehives

Bears occasionally attack livestock and damage beehives. Livestock can be protected with electric fencing or by moving them into a secure building at night. Store livestock and pet foods in airtight containers and clean up any spilled feed. Bears may attack sheep, goats, pigs, fowl, and llamas. Attacks on horses and cattle are less common. Bears rarely harm cats or dogs. However, they will go after pet rabbits in outdoor hutches. Beehives also can be protected with electric fencing or with reinforced wire and metal strapping.

Blueprint for a Black Bear



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Weight: Males, normally 150-450 lbs.; females, 110-250 lbs.; yearlings, 45 -100 lbs.

Body Characteristics: Stocky, with short, thick legs.

Color: Varies in color from black to brown; tan around the muzzle and occasionally has a white chest patch.

Locomotion: Plantigrade (walks on whole foot). Usually walks with a shuffling gait but can run at speeds of over 30 mph. Agile climber.

Senses: Exceptional hearing and smell.

Diet: Grasses, forbs, fruit, nuts, and berries. Occasionally preys on small mammals, rarely deer and livestock. Also seeks insects (ants, bees), scavenges carrion, and raids garbage cans and bird feeders.

Habitat: Mixed deciduous-coniferous forests with mast-producing overstories and understories, marshes, and thickets.

Social Behavior: Breeding occurs in early summer. Males may breed with several females, but are solitary in the non-breeding season. Females give birth while denned, usually in January. Cubs remain with the female for 1 1/2 years. Adult females breed every other year, less often in poorer habitat. Bears are most active at night. Often avoid humans but can be habituated by food sources found near homes.

Connecticut Population: Increasing. The resident population is estimated to be in the hundreds. The majority of the population inhabits northwestern Connecticut.



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