

Wild Things in Your Woodlands

Black bear (*Ursus americanus*)



Almost all New York black bears are black, although on rare occasion bears may be cinnamon or blonde in color. The muzzle is tinged with tan, and often bears will have a white blaze on their chest, sometimes in a prominent "V." The fur is thick, long, and fairly soft, and males and females are colored alike. The largest bear reported from New York weighed about 750 pounds. Males, called boars, are larger and heavier than females (sows). An average adult male weighs about 300 pounds and an average adult female weighs about 170 pounds. When standing on all four feet, black bears are less than 39 inches (1 meter) in height at the shoulder, and are seldom more than 78 inches (2 meters) long from tip of nose to the tip of the tail. Black bears are surprisingly agile; they can run up to 35 mph, climb trees and swim well. In the wild, black bears may live for 21-33 years, though the average age of bears harvested in New York is 5 years.

Black bears occur throughout New York State, though they are most abundant in the Adirondacks, the Catskills, and the southern tier along the border with Pennsylvania. They commonly inhabit large, extensive areas of forests, however, they are adaptable and use open and developed areas where shelter or thick cover, and abundant food, can be found nearby. New York State has a relatively high percent of forest cover, diverse food sources and an abundance of water. As agricultural lands have been abandoned and reforestation has occurred, New York's bear habitat has improved and significantly increased in area during the last 100 years.

As fall borders on winter, New York's 8,000 black bears are finishing their fall feast, after eating heartily for months in preparation for dormancy. Though typically most active at dusk and dawn, during the fall they may feed for up to 20 hours a day, ingesting up to 20,000 calories! Bears are omnivorous, eating almost anything, from berries, corn, acorns, beechnuts and even grass, to table scraps, dead animals, honey and insects. In a recent study of fawn survival in Pennsylvania, bears surprisingly were a major predator of fawns, second only to coyotes.

As cold weather arrives, black bears end the feast and seek out den sites. Though black bears are not true hibernators, they usually undergo a dormant period during the winter. Typically, female bears enter a den during October or November, and males enter their dens in November or December. The winter den may be a hollow tree or log, a crevice in a rock ledge, a cavity under a large rock or beneath the roots of a tree, or a "nest" on top of the ground or under fallen trees or brush. Bears will also den in drainage culverts or a depression dug in the ground. Some bears line their dens with bark, grasses or leaves. Females often select more sheltered sites than males. Males den alone, as do pregnant females (they give birth in the den), and females with cubs born the previous winter den with their young. A dormant bear's heart rate and breathing slow, and its body temperature drops slightly. During this time they do not eat, drink, or pass body wastes, and may lose a quarter of their body weight. A dormant bear relies on stored fat to make it through the winter, however, they may emerge if they're disturbed. Males leave their dens in March or April. Females and their cubs leave their dens later, sometimes as late as May.

In New York State, female black bears generally become sexually mature between two and five years of age, and males become sexually mature at four to six years of age. Bears are polygamous and breeding occurs from late May until perhaps as late as September. Cubs are born at the end of January or early February. Litter size varies from one to five, but two or three are most common in New York. Cubs den with their mothers during their second winter and disperse as yearlings during the second spring or summer. In New York, adult female bears regularly breed every other year.

The black bear is a wide-ranging animal (adult females have a home range of 1 -15 square miles and adult males have a home range of 8-60 square miles), and few properties are large enough alone to provide all the black bears needs. However, private landowners can take steps to manage their woodlands to provide food and cover for this magnificent animal. Encouraging a diversity of mast-producing trees like oaks and beech, and berry-producing shrubs, like blueberries and blackberries, can provide food for bears living in the area or just passing through. In addition to natural foods, a planted white and red clover food plot mixture has attracted bears during the cooler seasons. Providing cover in addition to food can also benefit bears. Retaining trees with large cavities, specifically those at the base of trees, can provide good denning habitat. Leaving tree tops following a timber harvest, or fallen trees in unharvested forests, can also supply denning cover.

Besides enhancing habitat in areas that bears might use, the best way to provide a safe environment for these animals is to avoid purposely feeding bears and remove access to garbage, bird feeders, pet food, livestock feed, and other attractants. Once bears find an easily meal they will return as long as food is available. The best way to stop a bear from coming into inhabited areas is to remove the food source for a month or more, but even then, there are no guarantees. A persistent bear may damage property, increase the risk of human injury, or become an unwanted visitor in other parts of the neighborhood. Bears who associate people with food are more likely to be killed by vehicles, and may be killed to alleviate safety or nuisance concerns. Unfortunately, the old saying does have

much truth to it – a fed bear is a dead bear. By not feeding bears artificially, landowners can do a lot to guarantee their survival.

Additional information on about the black bear and wildlife damage issues can be found at <http://wildlifecontrol.info/newdmc/pdfs/blackbear.pdf>

Kristi Sullivan coordinates the Conservation Education Program at Cornell's Arnot Forest. More information on managing habitat for wildlife, as well as upcoming educational programs at the Arnot Forest can be found by visiting the Arnot Conservation Education Program web site at www.dnr.cornell.edu/arnot/acep/

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