



Coexisting
with Wildlife
Fact Sheet #8

FUND FACTS

LIVING WITH BLACK BEARS

Throughout our history, humans have viewed black bears with fascination, awe, and sometimes fear. While the North American continent is home to three species of bears-black bears, brown (grizzly) bears, and polar bears-black bears are the most common species in the populated regions of the continent. As a result, black bears are often subject to exploitation by humans, including recreational hunting and poaching to supply the illegal trade in bear parts.

Black bears were hunted aggressively in the latter part of the 20th century, but protection measures enacted via legislation and regulation have helped to save the species from local extinction. As humans move into bear habitat, conflicts arise and black bears typically come out on the losing end. But humans know enough about bear behavior to develop a comprehensive strategy for solving these conflicts and peacefully coexisting with black bears.

Q: Who is the black bear?

A: The black bear (*Ursus americanus*) is a large, charismatic mammal who prefers old forests dominated by hardwood trees and shrubs that produce the fruits, nuts, and other plant parts needed for food. The black bear prefers a rugged habitat consisting of dense thickets, some water sources, and rocky outcrops. The black bear's range can vary widely, depending on availability of food sources, but typical core home ranges are two to fifteen miles. Bears have been recorded traveling well in excess of 100 miles to search for food in lean times.

Despite the name, the black bear has a light brown muzzle and a coat that varies in color from deep black to various shades of brown, cinnamon, and even white. Black bears in the eastern US tend to be black, while western black bears can exhibit a range of colors. The typical female weighs 100-180 pounds, while the male generally weighs 150-300 pounds. In the wild, a black bear



Photo by: Dave Siddon

could live for 30 years in the absence of human encroachment.

Black bears have among the slowest reproduction rates of all North American mammals. Females do not breed for the first time until they are four to eight years old and produce a litter every two to four years. The size of the litter can be dramatically affected by the availability of food for the sow prior to hibernation; a comparatively thin female bear may only give birth to one cub, while a female with access to plenty of food in the fall may have two, three, or even four cubs.

While black bears are omnivorous, they prefer to eat fruits, nuts, and plants. Although their teeth, claws, strength, and size make them look like predators, they seldom eat any animal larger than insects, preferring plants to meat. They can run quite quickly over short distances-a lean bear can run 30 miles per hour in a short burst.

Q: Are black bears dangerous to humans?

A: Despite a sometimes shady reputation perpetuated by popular media sensationalism, the black bear is not aggressive. Cases of black bear attacks on humans are extremely rare. When humans come upon a black bear in the wild, the bear's behavior is commonly misinterpreted to be aggressive. For example, when a bear wants to get a better scent or see someone better, the bear may stand on his or her hind legs. If a bear feels threatened he or she may growl or even mock-charge a human. But these instinctive behaviors do not represent actual threats to humans.

While there have been a handful of people who have been killed by black bears in North America in the last century, people have a much greater chance of being killed by lightning, bee stings, dog bites, or hunting accidents. Black bears should, of course, be treated with respect, distance, and caution, but they should not be feared.



Q: Will hunting solve nuisance bear problems?

A: Hunting bears at random for recreation is not an effective means of solving human bear conflicts, and may actually exacerbate these conflicts. Hunters tend to take adult male bears, skewing the population in favor of younger sub-adult males who will then be able to expand their range and fill the vacancies left by the adults. These sub-adult males are more likely to cause conflicts with people by looking for alternative food sources in homes, campsites, and dumpsters, as they attempt to establish their own territories. Black bear hunting results in mortality for a random sample of bears, and does not target those individual bears actually responsible for damage. In fact, by killing a bear who is not causing problems, hunters may open the door for another bear—potentially one more likely to cause problems—to move into the vacated territory.



Birds who feed at bird feeders typically leave a mess of spilled seeds and nuts on the ground, which can also attract bears. Clean the area under a bird feeder regularly to minimize this risk. Suet balls can solve the spillage problem but because of their high fat content and strong odor, they will likely attract curious bears more than seeds or nuts will. As with garbage, if a bear cannot easily get to the food in a bird feeder, he or she will likely move on to another, easier food source.

TREES AND GARDENS

Fruit trees and vegetable gardens can also attract bears. Trees can only be protected individually if the limbs, leaves, and fruit do not hang below a height of seven or eight feet. If this ground clearance is available, an individual tree can be protected with fencing or other techniques that keep bears from climbing the tree. For low-hanging trees, tree groves, and vegetable gardens, the best solution is sturdy, high-tensile woven wire fencing at least six to seven feet high. The fence posts must be sturdily mounted and the fencing wire must be heavy enough to withstand the weight of a climbing bear. Ideally the fence should be angled out at the top foot to keep bears from scaling the fence.

Q: How can I keep bears away from my property?

A: With the exception of very remote areas in the western US, human development has made it virtually impossible for a black bear to travel within his or her home range without approaching someone's property. But people living in black bear habitat around the country have developed many creative, nonlethal techniques for solving human bear conflicts.

Bears are opportunistic eaters, raiding trash cans and other human food sources if the opportunity presents itself. Once a bear learns of an easy food source, he or she will be back. If, on the other hand, food sources are not easily accessible the bear will move on to an easier target. It is incumbent upon those living in bear habitat to take steps to bear-proof their property.

FOOD AND GARBAGE

Bears have a strong sense of smell and are easily lured by the odor generated by trash, barbecues, and dog and cat food left outside. If you live in bear country, don't leave food outside. Store outside garbage in bear-proof containers, or put it outside just before the garbage pick-up time. Even with bear-proof garbage containers, garbage should be taken to a dump site at least twice a week. Keep

barbecue grills clean or stored in closed sheds or other buildings.

Hunting advocates often claim that bear nuisance complaints are an indication of a large bear population. But humans can have a direct affect on local bear populations simply by keeping artificial food sources, such as garbage, away from bears. Healthier, fatter sows will have larger litters. The results of a Minnesota study indicate that bears who feed on garbage will have litters with an average of four cubs, compared to an average litter size of two and a half cubs for bears who eat only natural food supplies.

BIRD FEEDERS

Bears are also attracted to the food in bird feeders. If you don't want bears on your property, you shouldn't have a bird feeder. If you insist on having a bird feeder, it should be hung at least seven to eight feet from the ground, in a location that does not allow a climbing bear to get to it (generally at least four feet horizontally from a tree or post). Bears can also knock over fragile posts, so if you choose to mount a bird feeder on a post, make sure the post is extremely secure—and not something the bear can climb.

Another fencing option is the installation of an electric fence. Because bears can learn how to get around them, electric fences are more of a "behavioral barrier" than an absolute barrier, which means that if they're not properly maintained, bears will learn how to get through them. The Colorado State University Cooperative Extension has published a good example of electric fence installation for bears on the internet at: www.ext.colostate.edu/pubs/natres/06519.html

Compost used for vegetable gardens may also prove irresistible for bears because compost generally starts out as food waste. The odor from decomposing food waste is particularly strong and of great interest to a bear. Compost containers must be bear-proof and should be stored far from the house.



AGRICULTURAL AREAS

By keeping well mown “buffer zones” around beehives, crops, and livestock holding areas, farmers can reduce natural cover for bears. Without cover, bears are typically discouraged from approaching a farm. When this is not feasible, electric fencing, even used temporarily, can be highly effective. The use of guarding animals to protect livestock from predators is gaining in popularity around the country and has proven highly effective. For protection of livestock against black bears in particular, guard dogs appear to be most effective.

HIKING AND CAMPING

Despite the fact that hikers in bear country spend their time in the bear’s habitat, sightings of black bears are rare. A bear typically knows a human is nearby before the hiker spots the bear, and the bear will usually leave the area. To ensure that you do not surprise a bear when hiking, it is a good idea to make noise periodically by whistling, talking, or otherwise making your presence known.

If you see a bear while hiking, make sure he or she knows you are there by waving your arms or making noise. If you come upon a bear by surprise walk slowly away. Keep dogs on leashes and under control—some dogs may act aggressively toward a bear, which would cause the bear to react in defense.

When camping in bear territory, do not cook food near your tent. If possible, cook downwind from your tent so that cooking odors do not collect in the tent. Store food and other items that give off odors in a car or bear-proof container outside your tent. You can also suspend food between two trees using a rope; the food should be at least seven or eight feet above the ground and not accessible by climbing the tree.

AVERSIVE CONDITIONING

Unwanted trespassing and crop damage by bears can be prevented through aversive conditioning. This method works by making an experience disagreeable enough to the bear that he or she is discouraged from repeating the undesirable behavior. Bear biologists and other trained agents use assertive behavior, chemical irritants, pyrotechnic scare devices, and rubber buckshot and bean bag rounds to teach a bear to stay away from human habitat. The typical aversive conditioning kit includes many items commonly available, such as high-volume water guns, air horns, emergency whistles, and automatic umbrellas. Products are available that use motion detectors to sense a bear’s presence and shoot water or sound alarms to scare the bear away.

Many state wildlife agencies in bear territory have some form of bear response plan, including the deployment of agency staff members trained in aversive conditioning techniques. While many aversive conditioning techniques are easy to employ, it is illegal in most states for the general public to “harass” bears. The process should be left to your state wildlife agency so that the bear has the best chance possible of being trained to stay away from human habitat.

Q: What should I do if I encounter a bear?

A: If you see a bear before he or she knows you are there, back away slowly and quietly, leaving the bear an avenue of escape. Do not run away, as this may awaken the bear’s instinct to chase. If the bear has seen you, back away slowly while facing the bear. Again, leave the bear an escape route.

If the bear exhibits an interest in you, make yourself seem larger and a possible threat by standing up, opening your jacket, waving your arms, and banging pots and pans. Pick up any small children or dogs, and stand in groups to appear larger. In the unlikely event that a bear attacks you, do not play dead. Fight back using any blunt objects available, such as rocks, cameras, and binoculars.

After any encounter with a bear, even simply a bear sighting, report the encounter to your state wildlife agency. A complete record of bear encounters gives the agency the data needed to develop an effective bear response plan.

Bear-Proofing Products

Bear-Proof Trash Cans and Enclosures

McClintock Metal “Securrr” products: Mini Depot, Hid-A-Bag I, Hid-A-Bag II, Hid-A-Bag Mini, Hid-A-Bag Recycler, Hyd-A-Meal, Hyd-A-Bag, Handicapped Accessible Recycler, The Bearier, Solid Waste Collection, Recycling Systems, Modular Transfer Stations, and Street Furnishings.

McClintock Metal Fabricators, Inc., 455 Harter Ave., Woodland, CA, 95776, (530) 666-6007, fax (530) 666-7071, email: mmfi@mcclintockmetal.com, website: www.mcclintockmetal.com/outdoor.htm

Bearable Trash Solutions: locking 64-gallon trash container.

Bearable Trash Solutions, 31.5 Evans Place, Pompton Plains, NJ 07444, (973) 764-0232, email: hammer66@nac.net, website: www.bearproofing.com/index5.htm

Deep Creek Lake Refuse Company: bear-proof trash enclosures.

Deep Creek Lake Refuse Company, Deep Creek Lake, MD, (301) 746-5620

Bear Deterrents

Margo Supplies LTD: Critter Gitter (uses passive infrared, body heat, and motion detection, detects bears moving into protected area then makes ear piercing sounds and flashing lights to scare bear away), Acme Turbo Siren and Fog/Signal Horn (two products produce discordant frequencies to frighten bears), 15 mm Scare Cartridges and Launchers (pistol-fired bangers and ear piercing screamers), Single Shot Pistol (shoots single .22 caliber regular blanks), Seven Shot Revolver (shoots multiple .22 caliber regular blanks), Trip Wire Fence System (sets off an alarm when a bear trips a wire fence), and Bear Alert Alarm System (part of an electric fence system, an alarm system which is activated when the bear touches the hot wire; the bear receives a shock which causes a short on the fence wire, simultaneously tripping the siren).

PO Box 5400, High River, Alberta, Canada T1V 1M5, (403) 652-1932, fax (403) 652-3511, email: info@margosupplies.com, website: www.margosupplies.com/cnd/products/bear/beardeterr.html

SmartHome Inc.: Scarecrow (motion sensor sprays water when it detects a bear)

SmartHome, Inc., 16542 Millikan Avenue, Irvine, CA 92606, (800) SMART-HOME, (800) 762-7846, fax (949) 221-9240, website: www.smarthome.com/6120.html

Q: Is there an illegal trade in bear parts?

A: Black bears nationwide continue to be poached for their gallbladders, paws, and other parts, which are illegally traded for use in the traditional medicinal products of some cultures. Bear parts are sold on the black market for thousands of dollars. The international trade of certain bear parts and derivatives is prohibited by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). While roughly 40,000 American black bears are legally hunted in North America each year, it is estimated that the same number or more are illegally poached to supply the illegal trade in bear parts.

Q: What can my state wildlife agency do?

A: Your state’s wildlife agency is responsible for managing wildlife for the benefit of the entire population of the state. In many cases however, the agency acts primarily in the interest of the recreational hunting community when making decisions about wildlife management. While some progressive states have developed comprehensive bear response plans, the agencies often feel pressure to shoot first and employ non-lethal techniques for solving human/bear conflicts later. State wildlife agencies should be encouraged to take the lead in educating the public about techniques for peaceful coexistence with black bears. They should also develop a nuisance bear response plan and train their staff in responding to nuisance complaints quickly, using the full array of non-lethal solutions available (including capture and relocation if necessary).

In an effort to increase public tolerance for bears, the Maryland legislature authorized the Department of Natural Resources to create the Black Bear Conservation Stamp Program in 1996. The proceeds from sales of stamps and related merchandise are directed to a fund used to compensate farmers for bear damage. This program, the only one of its kind, serves as a model for other states by supporting humane black bear solutions and generating public awareness of the need to protect black bears in the state. 🐻

Black Bear Population By State

State	1988	1992	1996
Alabama	50	40	50
Alaska	100,000-200,000	100,000-200,000	100,000-200,000
Arizona	2,500	2,500-2,700	2,000-3,000
Arkansas	1,700-2,000	2,300	3,000
California	15,000	15,000-18,000	17,000-23,000
Colorado	7,000-15,000	8000-12000	10,000-12,000
Connecticut	30	15-30	30-60
Delaware	0	0	0
Florida	1,000	1000-1500	1,000-1500
Georgia	1,500	1,700	1,800-2,000
Hawaii	0	0	0
Idaho	18,000-25,000	20,000-25,000	20,000-25,000
Illinois	0	0	0
Indiana	0	0	0
Iowa	0	0	0
Kansas	0	0	0
Kentucky	100	Unknown	25-75
Louisiana	100	300+	>300
Maine	21,192	19,000	22,000-23,000
Maryland	200	170	250-300
Massachusetts	700-750	700-750	1,200-1,800
Michigan	NA/NR	7,000-10,000	~12,000
Minnesota	9,200	10,500-14,500	20,000
Mississippi	25	25	<50
Missouri	50-100	50-150	100-200
Montana	NA/NR	9,000-10,000	20,000
Nebraska	0	0	0
Nevada	300	200-400	200-400
New Hampshire	2,500	3,000	2,000-3,000
New Jersey	175-225	275-325	550+
New Mexico	3,300	3,000	4,000
New York	4,100	4,000-5,000	4,000-5,000
North Carolina	3,000-4,000	5,500-6,250	8,500
North Dakota	0	50	>10
Ohio	0	20	12-30
Oklahoma	NA/NR	200	100-150
Oregon	20,000-25,000	25,000	25,000-30,000
Pennsylvania	7,500	7,500	7,500
Rhode Island	0	0-2	0-2
South Carolina	100	300	275+
South Dakota	0	0	Unknown
Tennessee	1,500-2,000	1,000-2,000	900-1,200
Texas	NA/NR	50	75-100
Utah	750	800-1,000	800-1,300
Vermont	2,000-2,500	2,100	2,500
Virginia	2,500	3,000-3,500	3,000-3,500
Washington	19,000	27,000-30,000	~30,000
West Virginia	2,000	3,000	5,000-6,000
Wisconsin	5,790	5,800	14,000
Wyoming	NA/NR	Unknown	Unknown
US Subtotal	252,862-375,312	289,095-416,662	339,000-465,000

Source: Williamson, Douglas F. *In the Black: Status, Management, and Trade of the American Black Bear (Ursus americanus) in North America*. TRAFFIC North America. Washington DC: World Wildlife Fund, 2002.