

LIVING WITH PENNSYLVANIA'S BLACK BEARS



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Pennsylvania has been a home to black bears since before the earliest settlers arrived. They have been roaming in our forests, wallowing in our bogs and swamps, and living around our farms and homes for a long, long time.

Bears are many things to many people: valued game animal, farm pillagers, neighborhood pets, garbage-eating pests, even the highlight of an outdoor experience. Our perceptions of bears are a product of their mostly shy, mysterious nature and powerful presence, not to mention the timeless stories that have been told about them over the years. Unfortunately there's as much misinformation about bears in circulation as there is fact. That's too bad because bears needn't be feared nor should they be dismissed as harmless. They simply need to be respected.

Pennsylvania's bear population has been increasing for years. As a result, bears and people are coming into contact more than ever before. These encounters are occurring because development is encroaching into or occupying bear habitat, and bears have learned that there's easy-to-obtain food where people live. Learning about bears and being aware of their habits is important for people who live in bear country, which now spreads throughout most of the state. Our

largest bear populations, however, are still found in our northcentral and northeastern counties.

THE BEAR FACTS



Ursus Americanus is the black bear's scientific name; it means "American bear." Although three species of bears inhabit North America, only the black bear can be found in Pennsylvania. Population estimates in recent years have ranged from 8,000 to 10,000 bears. Black bears are very agile, can run up to 35 mph, climb trees and swim well. They may live up to 25 years in the wild, although few do.

Black bears are intelligent and curious. Studies show bears can see colors, recognize human forms, and notice even the slightest movement. However, bears usually rely on their acute sense of smell and, to a lesser degree, hearing to locate food and warn them of danger.

Despite their common name, black bears are not always black. They may be cinnamon-colored, blond or black. Often they have a white spot or "V" on their chest.

Black bears appear heavy and have short, powerful legs. Adults usually weigh from 200 to 600 pounds, with rare individuals weighing up to 900 pounds. Males are called boars; females, sows. An adult male normally weighs more than an adult sow, sometimes twice as much. Black bears measure about three feet high when on all fours or about five to seven feet tall when standing upright.



BEAR SIGNS AND SOUNDS

Bear tracks are distinctive. The hind footprint resembles a human's. Bears have five toes. The front foot is shorter than the rear, which is long and narrow. Claw marks may or may not be visible.

Bears use trails just as people do. Look for tracks in soft earth or around mud puddles. Watch for claw marks on smooth-barked trees or rotten logs that have been ripped apart for insects. It's also easy to recognize a black bear's sizeable droppings of partly-digested berries, corn or animal hair.

Adult black bears make a variety of sounds that include woofing, growls and jaw-popping. Sows communicate with their cubs by using low grunts or huffs. Cubs whimper, chuckle and bawl.

FEEDING HABITS

Bears may be on the move at any time, but they're usually most active at night or during early morning. Bears are omnivorous, eating almost anything from berries, corn, acorns, beechnuts, or even grass to table scraps, carrion, honey and insects. During late summer and fall, black bears fatten up for winter hibernation. At this time, they may actively feed for up to 20 hours a day, ingesting up to 20,000 calories.

BEARS AND WINTER

Bears are usually dormant in winter, remaining in their dens, which are usually rock caverns, excavated holes beneath shrubs, trees or dead falls, in hollow trees or brushy thickets. A hibernating bear's heart rate and breathing slow and its body

temperature drops slightly. During this time, they do not eat or drink, or pass body wastes. A hibernating bear relies on stored fat to make it through winter. On warm winter days, however, bears may emerge to look for food.

MATING AND BREEDING

In Pennsylvania, bears mate primarily from early June to mid July. Males are very aggressive towards each other at this time.

Sows give birth in January; litters number one to five cubs. The newborns are blind, toothless, and covered with short, fine hair that seems to inadequately cover their pink skin. Cubs nurse in the den while the sow is hibernating. Nurtured with the sow's rich milk; they grow from a birth weight as light as 10 ounces to as much as 10 pounds by the time they leave the den in late March or early April. Boars do not help rear young.

Most black bear cubs stay with the sow for a little more than a year. They watch her every move and learn by imitating her. Cubs are playful, regularly romping and wrestling

with their littermates. The sows are very protective of cubs, sending them up trees if danger threatens. Adult males occasionally kill and eat cubs. The family group disbands the following summer when the sow again is ready to breed.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU LIVE IN BEAR COUNTRY

If you live or have a summer home in bear country, you may have to make adjustments in your lifestyle if you plan to coexist peacefully with these large animals. Make sure you don't encourage resident bears to become "nuisance bears" by carelessly handling garbage or intentionally feeding bears. Your carelessness could lead to a bear's removal from the area or its death.

Black bears will consume almost anything. They will eat human food, garbage, bird feeder offerings, pet foods and livestock feed. They also raid cornfields and destroy beehives. Once bears find easily-accessible food sources, whether on a farm or in a housing development, they overcome their wariness of



people and visit regularly. Often the only way to get rid of these unwanted, late-night visitors is to remove the food source for about a month. Even then, there are no guarantees.

You can reduce bear visits to your property by keeping garbage out of a bear's reach and as odor-free as possible. Encourage your neighbors to do the same. Store trash inside a building, garage or shed. Don't put out your trash until the morning of collection day. Be sure garbage cans are cleaned regularly using hot water and chlorine bleach.

If you have pets, bring their food pans inside at night. Speaking of dogs, bears generally steer clear of chained or penned dogs. Unleashed dogs that approach bears, however, may be perceived as a threat and could be seriously injured, even killed. If you have a dog in bear country, don't let it roam far from the house, leash it whenever you hike in the woods, and keep it in the house or in a kennel at night.

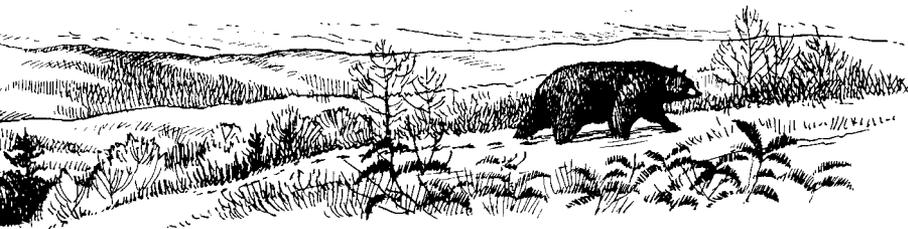
Other around-the-home tips include cleaning grease from your barbecue grill after every use, and prop-

erly disposing of grill grease. Don't dump the grease out back. If you feed birds during summer, you may want to bring all bird feeders, including hummingbird feeders, in at night. Bears also are attracted to fruit, melon rinds or other tasty items in mulch or compost piles.

Beehives attract bears, especially right after bruins come out of hibernation in the spring and during the peak honey production period in late summer and fall. You can protect your bees, honey and equipment if you surround hives with bear-deterrent fences. Contact the Pennsylvania Game Commission for more information about fencing.

Black bears are also attracted to sweet and field corn, especially in the milk stage. Bears can devastate cornfields. Call the Game Commission if bears are causing extensive damage; officers may be able to help you with your problem.

Recreational feeding areas — dumpsters, garbage pits and wildlife feeders where people gather to see bears — are bad news for bears



and people. Bears that frequent these areas often lose their natural fear of humans. Bears drawn to these places often take the next step, the one that puts them in close proximity to human dwellings. These are the bears that sometimes climb onto porches or break into houses to investigate enticing smells. Other times they raid bird feeders, clean out dog dishes, kill domestic animals or rifle through garbage containers.

If a bear is visiting your property, there are two possible courses of action. The first could be to make loud noises or shout at the bear, kind of like you'd react to your neighbor's dog getting into your trash, but keep your distance. The second option, would be to leave the bear alone, and clean up the bear's mess after it leaves. Follow up by making sure you eliminate bear feeding opportunities so the next time one comes around it will keep moving.

If bears are feeding regularly at a site, encourage your neighbors or community to clean up and close the area. Don't wait until spectators become a problem, or bears start roaming the neighborhood. Eliminate the feeding source; it's what lured the bears to your area.

CAMPING AND HIKING IN BEAR COUNTRY



Although black bears are generally shy and avoid contact with humans, it's important to remember that bears are the state's largest predators. Bears must be respected for

their size and strength. Do not deliberately approach a bear or try to become chummy with one that's coming to an established feeding site. Play it smart. Keep your distance.

If you camp or hike in bear country, you're responsible for doing all you can to prevent close encounters and conflicts with bears. Your giving a bear food may serve as encouragement for it to approach someone else, someone not looking for a close-up opportunity with a bear. If the person doesn't give the bear food, it could lead to an unpleasant and possibly dangerous experience. Never reward a bear for associating with people. It's what's best for you, the next person and the bear.

Here are some steps you can take if you're spending time afield in Penn's Woods:

1. Keep your camp clean and odor free. Wipe tables and clean eating utensils thoroughly after every meal. Burn all grease off grills and camp stoves. In short, keep your tent, camper and sleeping bag free of all food smells.
2. Store your food in safe or bear-proof places. Place foods and coolers in your car trunk or suspend them from a tree branch. **Never leave food in your tent.**
3. Dispose of garbage properly. Use the camp receptacles if provided, or store trash in your vehicle. Pack out your garbage if you must, but never leave your garbage behind.

4. If you hike at dawn or dusk your chances are greater of meeting a bear or other wildlife. In places where hearing or visibility is impaired (roar of fast-moving water, thick vegetation), reduce your chances of surprising a bear by talking or making noise.

5. Leave dogs at home or keep them on a leash.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU MEET A BLACK BEAR



Bear attacks are rare compared to the number of close encounters. In most cases, a bear will detect you first and leave the area long before you'll ever see it. However, if you do meet a bear before it's had time to leave, here are some suggestions. But remember, every situation is different with respect to the bear, the terrain, the people, and their activity.

STAY CALM — If you see a bear and it hasn't seen you, leave the area calmly. While moving away, talk to help the bear discover your presence.

GET BACK — If you have a close encounter, back away slowly while facing a bear. Avoid direct eye contact, which a bear may perceive as a threat. Give the bear plenty of room to escape. Wild bears

rarely attack people unless they feel threatened or provoked. If you're on a trail, step off on the downhill side and slowly leave the area.

DON'T CLIMB OR RUN — If a cub is nearby, try to move away from it. But be alert, there could be other cubs. Never climb a tree to escape because sows chase their cubs up trees when they detect danger. If you climb a tree, a sow may interpret that as an attempt to get her cubs. Stay on the ground and



don't run or make any sudden movements. Running may prompt the bear to give chase, and you can't outrun a bear.

PAY ATTENTION — Bears will use all of their senses to figure out what you are. If they recognize you as a person, some may stand upright or move closer in their efforts to detect odors in the air currents. Don't consider this a sign of aggression. Once a bear identifies you, it will usually leave the area. However, if the bear stays, it may pop its jaws as a warning sign that it's uncomfortable. That's a sign for you to leave. Back away and slowly leave the area. If you ignore the jaw popping warning, some bears have been known to bluff charge to within a few feet. If this occurs, wave your arms wildly and shout at the bear.

FIGHT BACK — Black bear attacks in the eastern United States are rare. However, they have occurred. If a bear attacks, fight back. Bears have been driven away when people have fought back with rocks, sticks, binoculars and even their bare hands.

The Pennsylvania Game Commission is responsible for managing, conserving and protecting wildlife. If you have a nuisance bear problem, or have been threatened by a bear, please contact the Pennsylvania Game Commission at the following telephone numbers:

Harrisburg Headquarters -
717-787-4250

Northwest Region Office-
814-432-3189

Southwest Region Office -
724-238-5639

Northcentral Region Office -
570-398-3423

Southcentral Region Office -
814-643-9635

Northeast Region Office -
570-675-5065

Southeast Region Office-
610-926-1966



For more information on the
Pennsylvania Game
Commission, visit
our web site at
<http://www.pgc.state.pa.us>