

Black Bear

Ursus americanus

According to Cherokee legend, the bear is the keeper of dreams. Bears inspired awe and respect among Native Americans, who relied on them for food, clothing and other necessities. Bears today continue to inspire people by their strength and impressive appearance. Many misconceptions circulate about the true nature of bears, because of movies, cartoons and children's stories. What is certainly true about the black bear is that it is an integral, prominent part of North Carolina's cultural, historical and natural heritage.

There are three species of bears in North America—the polar bear, the black bear and the brown (grizzly) bear. The black bear is the only species in North Carolina.

History and Status

Black bears were once plentiful throughout North Carolina. In colonial times, the black bear probably inhabited the entire state. Today, black bears occupy only about 1,900 square miles of their historic range of 48,800 square miles. Originally, there may have been as many as 100,000 bears in the state. Today there are approximately 4,000. The bear population declined as the state's human population grew, because of habitat destruction and unrestricted hunting and trapping. Large-scale logging operations around the turn of the 20th century had an especially destructive impact on bear habitat. Before the habitat could recover, the American chestnut

blight hit the mountain region in 1925, causing the loss of the most important acorn-producing tree. Logging and the construction of ski areas and second-home developments have eliminated most of the habitat for black bears on private lands in the mountains. The continued draining and clearing of coastal wetlands for agriculture and forestry is eliminating bear habitat in the eastern part of the state.

Description

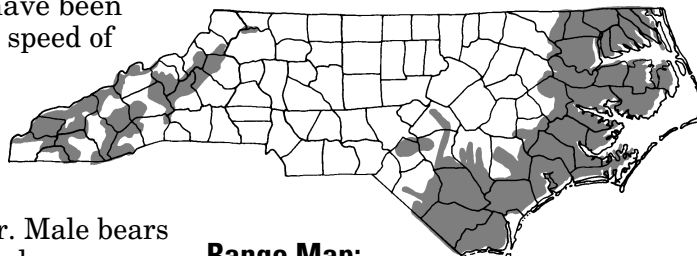
The black bear is an omnivore, eating mostly vegetable matter, some insects and some meat. Black bears vary in color. In North Carolina, the black bear is usually black with a brown muzzle and sometimes a white patch on its chest. The bear's feet have five toes, each with a sharp curved claw that enables the bear to feed on insects and grubs in decaying logs. Black bears are adept at climbing, running, swimming and digging. They have been clocked running at a speed of 32 mph over short distances. They rely mostly on their senses of smell and hearing, as their eyesight is poor. Male bears are called boars, females sows and young bears cubs.

Habitat and Habits

Bears prefer large expanses of uninhabited woodland or swamp-land with dense cover. In the mountains this requirement is met with large tracts of mixed hardwoods. In the east, lowland hardwoods, swamps and pocosins provide good bear habitat.

Bears get fat in autumn to prepare for denning. In mid to late December, bears usually begin to enter winter dens. They emerge in late March or early April, depending on the weather and food availability. They may den in a cavity of a live tree but may also use a hollow log, a cave, a rock outcropping, a cavity in the ground or simply a bed in a thicket. Usually they will construct nests of leaves, sticks and grass within the den.

Black bears are not true hibernators. They enter a state of dormancy or deep sleep, during which their breathing is slowed, their heartbeat is reduced from



Range Map:

Occupied Range ■

**WILD
Facts**

40 beats/minute to 10 beats/minute and their body temperature is reduced from 100 F to 90 F. They do not eat, drink or excrete body wastes, but can be easily aroused and fully alert in minutes.

Range and Distribution

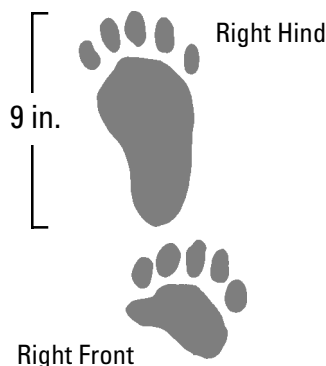
The black bear is found in approximately 23 states and all the Canadian provinces and territories. Today black bears are generally found in 24 mountain and 28 coastal counties in North Carolina. Bears are not found in the Piedmont because of the high human population.

Bears live in an area (home range) of approximately 2,000-3,000 acres for females and 11,000 to 15,000 acres for males (22,000 in coastal areas). The home range of bears is affected primarily by food and cover, sex and age and may overlap or be completely shared with others.

People Interactions

The black bear is a very shy, nonaggressive animal that avoids human beings. If you encounter a bear in the woods, you should stop and slowly back away. Occasionally bears wander into towns in search of food and may raid crops in fields, when food is scarce in their natural habitat. However, bears should not be fed, as they are wild animals.

In North Carolina, about 485 bears are killed by hunters each year, most of whom use hounds to pursue the bear. Each year approximately 30 to 40 bears crossing highways are hit and killed by automobiles. Approximately 800,000 acres of land have been designated as bear sanctuaries. Bears cannot be hunted in these areas.



References

Collins, John. *The Black Bear in North Carolina* (North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission).

Kephart, Horace. *Our Southern Highlanders* (University of Tennessee Press, 1976).

Shepherd, Paul. *The Sacred Paw* (Viking, 1985).

Credits

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BLACK BEAR

Classification

Class: Mammalia

Order: Carnivora

Average Size

Length: 5-6 ft.

Height: 2-3 ft. on all fours

Weight: females 100-300

lbs., males 150-590 lbs.

Food

fruits, berries, acorns, nuts, corn, leaves, roots, honey, insects, frogs, reptiles, grasses, grubs, larvae, seeds, carrion, fish, small mammals.

Breeding

Males called boars, females called sows. Become sexually mature in 2 to 3 years. Mate in July. Males mate with several females, females breed every other year. Gestation period is 7 months (fetus actively develops for only 30-45 days).

Young

Called cubs. Litter size is 1-5, usually 2 or 3. Eyes remain closed for 25 days, weaned at 7 months. Cubs are 6-12 ozs. when born, gain 50 pounds in 6 months. Cubs usually stay with their mother through their first winter. In early spring, the mother and year-old cubs separate and she will mate again in July. The yearlings may stay together for another year.

Life Expectancy

Average 4-5 years, few live longer than 10 years. Oldest wild bear was 26.