



**New Mexico
Wildlife Center**

Black Bear

Ursus americanus may be found in 42 of the 50 states. It is mainly a forest animal but may reside in canyons in the Southwest. Black bears may appear brown, cinnamon or even blonde in color. Hunting, forest clearing and urbanization have greatly impacted black bear numbers in the lower 48 states, especially in some mid-west states where they have been extirpated. In the wild they may live to be 20 years old. They are good climbers, good swimmers and can run as fast as 35 miles per hour for a short distance.

Black bears are not true hibernators but will den up for the winter and persist in a kind of “groggy” state with somewhat lowered temperature and respiration rates. During their “hibernation”, generally in January, the female gives birth to one or two cubs, every two to three years. The cubs weigh four to eight pounds in the spring when they leave the den and quickly gain weight. Generally the cubs will spend the following winter in the den with their mother and disperse the following spring.

Bears are omnivores and will eat insects, berries, nuts, grasses fish, carrion, bees and honey and your lunch if they find your pack sitting beside a trail. They also have very good memories and will return to a good food source from a long distance away.

If you live in bear country, there are several important things to remember. Bears are very intelligent and very adaptable. Unfortunately, due to fear and carelessness, bears are often killed by property owners or game wardens, if they become a nuisance. The option of relocating a bear is not a viable one. Bears will try to find their way back to their home territory and most will die trying. The best option is to avoid attracting bears to your home. Once a bear learns that food is available from humans, it will continue to seek it out. Bears are constantly searching for food and need to build up massive fat stores to make it through the winter. By making human and pet food accessible to bears, you create problem bears. So, if you live in bear country please remember: do not fill bird feeders in the summer and fall; do not leave your pet food outside or easily accessible; clean your grill and grease trap after each use; do not put your garbage out the night before pick up; install electric fences around your orchards, crops, beehives or compost pits; and clear away dense brush and protective cover from yard.

If you are visiting bear country as a backpacker, camper or hiker, please remember a bear's sense of smell is so acute that they can detect animal carcasses upwind and from a distance of 20 miles away. You should just assume that they can smell the food in your backpack too. They will smell food on the shirt you wore while you cooked dinner, or the toothpaste in your pack. If camping and cooking in the wilderness, cook your food and clean your dishes at least 100 feet away from your camp. The best way to store your food is in a portable bear resistant canister. Do not sleep in the clothes you cook in. Do not keep food or toiletries in your tent.

While hiking, be alert and aware of your surroundings. Bears are nervous and easily frightened, so try to announce your presence. Black bear attacks on humans are very rare. If they have a route of escape from humans they usually will take it. Occasionally they will stand their ground and make threatening sounds. They may even charge or "bluff" charge. When you encounter a bear:

- Stop and remain calm
- Do not make any sudden movements
- Pick up small children
- Assess situation—are their cubs close? Is the bear protecting a food source?
- Talk firmly in a low—pitched voice and back away slowly
- DO NOT RUN
- If bear stand up, it is not preparing to charge
- Always remain standing
- If the bear attacks- fight back with whatever weapon you have at hand.

(from Hiking in Black Bear Country, a brochure from BeBearAware.org)

Bears act upon two main impulses fear and hunger. Most bear encounters are the result of a bear reacting defensively rather than acting aggressively. By understanding their behavior and their needs, you can avoid unpleasant encounters, and keep bears alive and well.

For more information on black bears in New Mexico, please visit:

<http://www.sandiamountainbearwatch.org>

To report potentially dangerous activity, please call New Mexico Game and Fish at 505-827-7376.