



# Black Bear Biology

*Optional Procedures II: For use in completing chart on page 35.*

The black bear (*Ursus americanus*) can be found in the United States, Canada, and Alaska. In the east, the black bear primarily inhabits forests and swamps. In the west, the black bear roams chiefly in mountainous areas. Black bears are primarily nocturnal but occasionally roam around during midday.

A black bear's life span averages 20 to 25 years. Longevity and survival of the black bear depend upon the availability of a suitable habitat and its ability to avoid humans. An adult female bear is called a sow. An adult male bear is called a boar.

A baby bear is called a cub. When a sow becomes sexually mature between 2 and 3 years old, she is capable of breeding and may have one to four cubs. Contrasted with human fetal development of about nine months, the sow is pregnant for about seven months.

The sow has her cub or cubs in the shelter or den where she spends the winter months. On average, a female black bear will have two cubs. The sow does not have a litter every year but every other year. At birth, a young cub weighs about 8 ounces—about the size of a guinea pig. Bear cubs stay in the den with their mother until they are able to move around very actively, usually until late April or early May.

Bears and humans are classified as mammals, which means that both are warm-blooded, nourish their young with milk, and are covered with varying amounts of hair. Bear cubs and humans survive solely on their mother's milk for the first few months of life. Cubs nurse while in the den and only for a short time after leaving the den in early spring. By the time berries ripen and grasses are plentiful, the cubs have learned to climb and can eat the available food sources.

Soon the cubs will need to hunt and gather food for themselves without the help of the sow. At about 18 months of age, the cubs must go out searching for their own home range. The sow will allow the female cubs to stay within her

home range. The male cubs, however, must find territory to claim as their own.

Black bears are omnivores, which means they eat both plant and animal material. In early spring, they tend to eat wetland plants, grasses, insects, and occasionally carrion (dead animal matter) or the protein-rich maggots found near the carrion.

In late spring and early summer, bears feed on berries, grubs, and forbs (broad-leafed plants). In late summer and early fall, bears feed mostly on nuts and acorns. In the fall season, bears must add much fat to their bodies in order to survive the winter months in their dens. Cub growth will vary throughout the country.

When black bear cubs reach 1 year of age, the female cubs weigh 30 to 50 pounds, and the males weigh 50 to 70 pounds. A mature female bear weighs 150 to 185 pounds, and a male bear weighs about 275 pounds. The average height of an adult male black bear standing upright is 5 to 6 feet. (Sources: *Arkansas Black Bear: A Teacher's Guide for Kindergarten Through Sixth Grade*, Arkansas Game and Fish Commission; *WILD About Bear*, ID Dept of Fish and Game; and *A Field Guide to the Mammals*, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1980).

