

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 usually active in early morning and early evening and bedded most of the day and night.

A black bear's life span averages 12 to 15 years in the wild. Longevity and survival of the black bear depend upon the availability of a suitable habitat and its ability to avoid humans.

A baby bear is called a cub. When a female bear becomes sexually mature between 3 and 6 years old, she can breed and may have one to four cubs. Contrasted with human fetal development of about nine months, the female bear is pregnant for about seven months.

The pregnant bear 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 and 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 late 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 their mother. At about 18 months of age, the cubs must go out searching for their own home range. The adult female 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-leaved plants). In late summer and early fall, bears feed mostly on nuts and acorns. In the fall season, bears must add as much fat as they can to their bodies to survive the winter months in their dens. The size and weight of bears vary significantly and can be affected by what food the bear has access to, their geographic range, whether they are male or female, their health, age, and the time of year.

When black bear cubs reach 1 year of age, they often weigh between 40 to 100 pounds. A mature female bear weighs on average 90-150 pounds, and a male bear weighs on average 130-300 pounds. The average height of an adult male black bear standing upright is 5 to 6 feet. (*BearWise BRIEF, Meet the American Black Bear*, BearWise®, BearWise.org; *Ursus americanus* (*American black bear*), International Association for Bear Research and Management, www.bearbiology.org; *Wildlife Note, Black Bear*, Pennsylvania Game Commission, www.pa.gov; *Black Bear*, Connecticut Dept. Of Energy & Environmental Protection, portal.ct.gov).

