



Fact Zone

## Get The Facts!

### American Black Bear

(*Ursus americanus*)

### Fact Sheet

The American black bear, North America's smallest and most common bear species, is an opportunist omnivore that is able to inhabit temperate to sub-tropical regions, scrub forests, swamps, rainforests and tundra; such diversity enables survival on a vast array of foodstuffs, at elevations from sea level to 3500m (11483ft). Due to its large population the American black bear is listed by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) as a species of "Least concern".

**Description:** The skull of the male black bear is wide with a long narrow muzzle, more svelte in the females. Their claws are short and rounded and more or less the same length on all four paws, whose soles are naked and leathery. Ears are small and rounded and set back on the head. The male bear's average weight is 120kg (265lbs), length up to 2m (6½ft) nose to tail, while females are slightly smaller averaging 80kg (176lbs) and up to 1.6m (5¼ft) in length, however the largest males can be almost twice as heavy as the largest females. They stand ⅔ to 1m (2-3ft) high at the shoulder and have coats that are soft and dense with long guard hairs and display much color variation ranging from blonde though cinnamon, light to dark brown and jet black with intermediate colors throughout.

**Habitat:** Black bears prefer large forests that offer a variety of fruits and nuts, but also happily occupy lowlands and wetlands for their lush vegetation. They have been recorded in Alaska, Mexico, Louisiana and Labrador, and it is due to their capacity to survive in such diverse habitats that has led to the bears' success and frequency.

**Food:** According to location and seasonality, black bears will utilize herbaceous vegetation, fruits and nuts, roots and buds, insects at all stages of their life cycle, and vertebrates from fish to mammals and carrion. They raid birds' nests for eggs and chicks, bee's nests for honey and will take young deer and calves for their viscera. An unfortunate development of their diverse eating habits has led to the bears' appreciation of human garbage that has caused problems in many areas. Even cacti have a dietary role especially during periods of drought. Following hibernation, young tree and bush shoots are important, as they are frequently the only foodstuffs available in spring.

**Hibernation:** American black bears occupying northern regions hibernate for up to 7 months, while their more southerly relatives who have food available all year round can either remain active during the winter or hibernate for considerably shorter periods of 3-5 months, however all parturient (pregnant) females take to their dens to give birth in January and February. Hibernating bears typically enter their dens during October and November having put on extra body weight to enable them to sustain the 7 month fast.



They sleep in hollowed-out dens under logs, rocks, in banks, caves and shallow depressions. During hibernation their heart rate drops from 98 beats per minute to 8b/m, and while they lose between 25 and 40% of their bodyweight, their temperature remains at about 35°C. Bears neither urinate nor defecate while sleeping; nitrogenous waste is biochemically recycled which aids reduction in muscle loss during their long period of inactivity. Upon emerging from their dens in spring, bears reactivate their sluggish metabolism by wandering the territory, scavenging carrion and new shoots.

**Reproduction and development:** Female black bears reach sexual maturity between 3 and 5 years of age. Mating takes place between June and August and lasts 2 to 3 weeks. Gestation is 235 days with litters born in January and February, during the hibernation period in northern bears. Two cubs is the usual litter size, each weighing 283 to 453 grams (10-16 ounces) at birth, reaching 2.26kg (5lbs) at 8 weeks and 18 to 27 kilograms (40-60lbs) at 6 months. Full growth is achieved at 5 years of age. The average lifespan of a wild bear is 18 years.