



American Black Bear

Black bears roamed the forests of southern New England when the first European settlers arrived. During the ensuing period of colonization, habitat loss due to agricultural development, unregulated hunting and persecution due to damage of livestock and crops, brought black bears to the brink of extinction in southern New England. With the emergence of modern wildlife management practices and philosophies in the early 1900's, bears and many other species of wildlife were afforded protections under federal and state laws. As farms in the Northeast were abandoned, regeneration of forests created more suitable habitat, allowing black bear populations to recover in recent decades.

LIFE HISTORY

Range and Habitat: The American black bear (*Ursus americanus*) is the smallest of the three bear species found in North America, and the only species found in the Eastern United States. They prefer forested habitat, particularly older age stands that offer hard mast (i.e. acorns and other nuts) with proximal wetland, meadows and other habitat types for foraging. Most bears seen in Rhode Island in recent years are transient young males, likely born in Massachusetts or Connecticut. While only a small number of resident bears are estimated to currently inhabit Rhode Island, the population is expected to increase as numbers in neighboring states grow.

Behavior: Black bears lead solitary lives except during breeding season or while rearing cubs. A male's home range might be between 12 and 60 square miles, while females only range 5 to 7 square miles. Adult bears will defend their territories against other bears perceived as intruders but tend to avoid direct confrontations whenever possible. Aside from a female with cubs, black bears are mild-tempered and will typically avoid interactions with humans.

Food Habits: Black bears eat a wide variety of foods including grasses, herbs, fruits, and nuts. They will also feed on carrion (dead animals) and insect larvae. Black bears will opportunistically prey on small mammals or deer fawns but are not physically designed for chasing and capturing prey. **Black bears will actively seek out foods high in protein or fat, such as birdseed, pet food, livestock feed and garbage.** This leads to larger bears, higher birth rates, and higher cub survival rates.

Threats: Adult bears have few natural enemies. The number one cause of mortality is often human-related causes (i.e. vehicle strikes). Habitat loss is an ongoing problem for bears and poses the biggest threat to long-term viability of the species in many areas. Illegal take may be an issue in some areas; black bears are protected in Rhode Island and cannot be hunted or taken by any method (*RIGL 20-16-1*).

DID YOU KNOW...

- Black bears were once common in Rhode Island but vanished around the year 1800.
- Black bears with unlimited food supplies have weighed in at over 600 lbs. Average weight for males (boars) is 150-450 lbs; females (sows) 100-250 lbs.
- Black bears have an exceptional sense of smell and excellent hearing, but poor eyesight.
- Black bears are long lived; healthy bears can reach 20 years old.
- "Signposts" are trees or telephone poles that bears scratch, bite or rub on to convey messages.

ENCOUNTERING A BEAR

DO: Remain calm, back away slowly, make loud noises/try to appear big

DO NOT: Attempt to approach the bear, turn and run, attempt to climb a tree

Reproduction: Female black bears usually do not have their first litter until three to four years old and then typically breed every two years. While males become sexually mature at the same age, they are likely not yet able to compete with older, dominant males for breeding opportunities. Breeding season for black bears in our area occurs during late June and July. During this time, adult males may travel great distances in search of females.

Female black bears exhibit delayed implantation, a process whereby fertilization occurs immediately after mating, but the embryo does not fully develop until a later time. Litters of around 2-3 cubs are born in the den in January or February. At birth, cubs are blind and toothless and weigh less than 1 pound. They are active and will nurse while their mother rests in her den until spring.

Young bears either leave or are driven away by their mother in the spring following their second winter. Young male bears, away from their mother for the first time, often travel great distances looking for food and unoccupied territories. These young males often venture into residential backyards looking for food. Young female bears typically do not travel very far from where they were born and tend to stay close to their mothers' home range.

Hibernation: Black bears are not considered to be true hibernators. Their body temperature and respiration rate decrease during winter denning, but not to the extent of true hibernators such as woodchucks and bats. Black bears do not eat, drink, or defecate while they are in the winter den and they can quickly awaken if they are disturbed. In the southern parts of their range, they may not hibernate at all, or may only do so for short periods. Winter den sites may be in large, hollow tree trunks, under tree stumps, brush piles, rock outcrops, or sometimes in or under man-made structures.

The bears often line their winter dens with grass, leaves, or moss. In the northeast, winter denning usually takes place between November and March and females that are pregnant or with cubs enter the den earlier and spend longer periods in the den than males.

LIVING WITH BEARS

Bear population growth and range expansion in southern New England is expected to continue. Rhode Island residents can expect to see more bears in coming years, particularly in the rural parts of Providence, Kent and Washington Counties. Bears are shy and

will usually avoid interactions with people, but food resources near homes will attract bears into backyards and residential areas. This will condition them to associate food with human activity.

The DEM's response to nuisance or problem black bears is dependent on the circumstance. The presence of a bear in a backyard will not necessarily require or justify its removal. Given the opportunity, the bear will find its way out of an area and in most situations, removal of food attractants is enough to resolve the problem. Capture and removal will usually only be attempted if it is determined that a bear is unlikely or unable to leave an area on its own. Bears that demonstrate persistent destructive behavior such as killing livestock, entering buildings, or aggressive behavior towards humans may be candidates for lethal removal.

TIPS FOR PREVENTING PROBLEMS WITH BEARS

Remove any outdoor food sources such as:

- **Bird feeders:** Only feed birds from November 1st to March 31st when bears are not active.
- **Trash bins or dumpsters:** Trash should be secured in containers and only put out on the curb the morning of trash collection.
- **Compost:** Do not place meat scraps or fatty items in compost piles.
- **Pet food dishes:** Avoid feeding pets outside or bring in dishes at night.
- **Livestock:** Secure livestock in pens or buildings. Certain feeds, especially "sweet feeds," attract bears. Electric fencing should be used to protect chickens, rabbits and beehives. Place livestock, pens and beehives away from forest edges.

Never intentionally feed bears.

It is illegal in Rhode Island, and will create problems for humans and bears alike.

TO REPORT A BEAR SIGHTING

Please contact the
RIDEM Division of Fish & Wildlife:
(401) 789-0281

In the case of an **EMERGENCY** please contact the RIDEM Division of Law Enforcement:
(401) 222-3070