



American Black Bear

(*Ursus americanus*)



Black bears were likely common in the forests of southern New England when the first European traders and settlers arrived. During the ensuing period of colonization, most of the land was cleared for agriculture, directly reducing habitat for bears and other native wildlife. Bears and other large mammals were hunted for food and fur without regulation and persecuted because of damage caused to livestock and crops. Black bears most likely disappeared from Rhode Island prior to 1800.

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. Additionally, as many farms in the Northeast were abandoned, regeneration of forests created suitable habitat. Black bear populations have been slowly increasing throughout Southern New England in recent decades. As bear populations increase in neighboring states, black bear sightings in Rhode Island will become an increasingly common occurrence, particularly in the more rural parts of Kent, Providence and Washington counties.

Description

The American black bear (*Ursus americanus*) is the smallest of the three species of bear found in North America, and the only species found in the Eastern United States. Black bears are intelligent and adaptable, and can be relatively long-lived. As with other bear species, they are large-bodied animals with a stocky build and relatively short legs. They can grow up to around six feet in length. Adult male bears (boars) are larger than adult females, typically weighing between 150 and 450 pounds, while females (sows) generally weigh between 100 and 250 pounds. Bears that have access to unlimited food supplies can achieve even greater weights, as some have been recorded at over 600 pounds.

As their name would suggest, black bears have black fur, often appearing glossy black. The muzzle is typically tan and they sometimes have a white blaze on their chest. Color variations including dark brown, cinnamon, blond or blue/grey may occur in some parts of their range. The tail is short, and may not be seen at all. Bears have five toes with non-retractable claws on all four feet that give them excellent tree-climbing abilities. Black bears have an exceptional sense of smell and excellent hearing. Their eyesight is somewhat less acute and they will often stand on their hind legs to get a better look around.



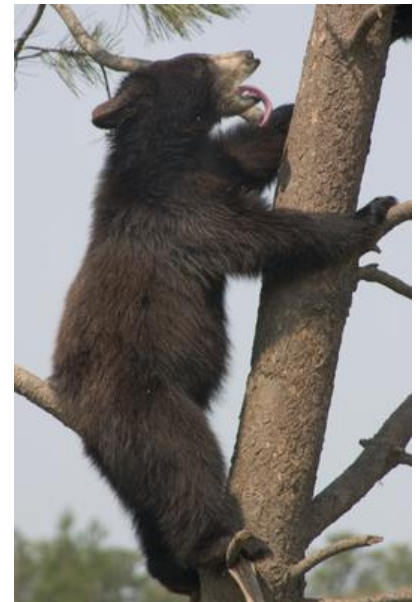
Life History

Range and Habitat: The American black bear is found only in North America and is the only species of bear that occurs in the Eastern United States. Black bears 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. They occur as far south as Florida and Northern Mexico, and as far north as the boreal forests spanning across Canada and Alaska, from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Many populations in the east-central and Southern United States occur only in the protected mountains and woodlands of parks and preserves. It is not known how many bears currently live in Rhode Island. Most bears seen in recent years are transient young males, likely born in neighboring states. As populations increase in the region, Rhode Island will eventually (if not already) have a resident bear population.



Home range size for black bears is variable and depends on the quality of habitat and other factors. Generally, adult males have larger home ranges than the females. Regional studies have shown the home range of adult males may be from 12 to 60 square miles and sometimes larger. Female home ranges are smaller and those with cubs may use an area of only 5 to 7 square miles or less. Aside from female bears with cubs, or during breeding season, black bears lead solitary lives. Adult bears will defend their territories against other bears perceived as intruders, but tend to avoid direct confrontations. Bears have a complex social structure and convey messages through scratching, biting and rubbing on trees and utility poles. These “signposts” reveal who is in the area and their social position, reproductive status, and other messages.

Food Habits: Black bears eat a wide variety of foods including grasses, herbs, fruits and nuts. They will also feed on carrion (*i.e.* dead animals) and they will eat the larvae of many insects such as ants, beetles, bees and termites. Black bears will opportunistically prey on small mammals or deer fawns, but are not physically designed for chasing and capturing prey. The natural diet of black bears is typically high in carbohydrates but low in proteins and fats. They will actively seek out foods with high protein or fat content, such as birdseed, pet food, livestock feed and garbage. Bears feeding on a protein rich food source show significant weight gains and increased birth rates.



Reproduction: Female black bears generally reach breeding age at three to four years old, and with sufficient nutrition typically breed every two years. A small number of females will breed at two years of age. While males become sexually mature at the same age, they are likely not yet able to compete with the older, larger, 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 breeding age females. Dominant adult males may breed with more than one female. After breeding, adult males go their separate way and do not participate in raising the young.



Female black bears have delayed implantation, a process whereby fertilization occurs immediately after mating, but the embryo does not fully develop until a later time. The cubs are born in the den in January or February. At birth, cubs are blind and toothless and typically weigh between 6 ounces and 1 pound. They are active and will nurse while their mother rests in her den until spring. Litter size may vary from one to five but a litter of two or three cubs is most common. Cubs are weaned (moved from milk to a solid food diet) at about seven months old. They will stay with



their mother for about eighteen months. During this time, their mother offers them protection from predators and other dangers, and shows them where and when to find food. Young bears either leave or are driven away by their mother in the spring following their second winter with her in the den. She will then be receptive to breed again. Young male bears, away from their mother for the first time, often travel great distances looking for food and unoccupied territories, as well as trying to avoid contact with older male bears. It is often these young males that 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: Hibernation is a survival strategy used by many mammal species to cope with adverse environmental conditions, such as cold temperatures or lack of available food resources. 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, bats and ground squirrels. Black bears do not eat, drink, or defecate while they are in the winter den. 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.

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 many wildlife species, which poses the biggest threat to long-term viability of the species in many areas. Illegal take may be an issue in some areas. Very few black bears die of disease.

Black bears are protected in Rhode Island and cannot be hunted or taken by any method (RIGL 20-16-1)

Living With Bears



Bear going after bird seed in Charlestown, R.I. Photo courtesy of Bonnie and Joe Mackenzie.

At one time, it was thought that black bears required large areas of forest with little human disturbance to survive. Bears have proven to be much more tolerant of human activity than previously believed. We now know that bears cannot just survive, but actually thrive in suitable habitat with close proximity to people.

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. Food resources near homes will attract bears into backyards and residential areas and condition them to associate food with human activity. Bird feeders, pet food, unsecured trash, livestock feed, compost piles, fruit trees, and bee hives are all potential food for bears. Taking simple actions and precautions can prevent or reduce conflicts and damage, and reduce problem behavior of bears.

To avoid problems with bears

- Wait until November 1st to start feeding birds and try to remove feeders by late March. If a bear does visit your feeder, remove it, at least temporarily. Suspend feeders high enough off the ground so that they cannot be reached by bears. Bears have excellent memories and they will remember easy-to-reach feeders.
- Secure trash in containers or buildings that cannot be accessed by bears. Wait until the morning of trash collection before putting trash at the curb. Dumpsters should be secured to prevent bears from entering.
- Avoid feeding pets outdoors. If you do, do not leave food dishes out overnight.
- Secure livestock feeds in buildings or in containers that cannot be accessed by bears. Certain feed types, especially “sweet feeds” can be particularly attractive to bears.
- Do not place meat scraps or fatty items in compost piles.
- Secure your small livestock in pens or buildings that bears cannot access. Goats, pigs, and sheep are occasionally predated by bears, horses and cows rarely so. Chickens and rabbits are easy targets unless fencing and hutches are secure. Use electric fencing to protect poultry and small livestock. Protect beehives with electric fencing. Avoid placing beehives close to the edge of woods. Hives and livestock pens directly adjacent to the tree line is more at risk than those in the open or closer to the house.
- **DO NOT INTENTIONALLY FEED BEARS.** It is not only illegal in Rhode Island, but it is also bad for the bears. Feeding bears will only cause problems for you, your neighbors, and ultimately the bear.



If you encounter a bear on your property or while in the woods, do not panic. Bears are rarely aggressive towards people. Given adequate warning and opportunity, bears will almost always flee from humans. It is possible that given the right wind conditions you might inadvertently come upon a bear without it being aware of your presence. If you find yourself in such a situation, back away while continuing to face the bear. Do not run. Do not try to climb a tree, bears are better climbers and it may put you in a more dangerous position. Bears will sometimes “bluff” charge when they feel threatened, are scared, or feel cornered. If this happens it is probably best to just stand your ground and make a lot of noise.

If you see a bear in your yard either leave it alone or attempt to scare it away from within your house or from a safe distance. Often just your presence at the door or window is enough. After the bear leaves, remove whatever item may have attracted the bear.

The DEM has developed a policy for dealing with nuisance or problem black bears. The Department’s response will depend on the circumstances in each situation. The presence of a bear in a backyard will not necessarily require or justify its removal or other action. Given the opportunity, the bear will find its way out of an area. In most situations, removal of food attractants is enough to resolve the problem. The DEM will only attempt to relocate a bear under certain circumstances. 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. Report all bear encounters to the DEM.

Immobilization of a bear or any wild animal is difficult even under the most ideal circumstances and several issues must be considered before it will be attempted. Bears cannot be relocated to other states. Bears that demonstrate persistent destructive behavior such as killing livestock, entering buildings, or aggressive behavior towards humans may be candidates for lethal removal.

FOR QUESTIONS, INFORMATION, OR TO REPORT A SIGHTING, PLEASE CONTACT THE DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT: DIVISION OF FISH AND WILDLIFE, OR IN THE CASE OF AN EMERGENCY: THE DIVISION OF LAW ENFORCEMENT

Division of Fish and Wildlife
(401) 789-0281

Division of Law Enforcement
(401) 222-3070

Selected References

“Deterring Bears with Electrified Fencing: A starter’s guide to constructing a front country electric fence” by Kim Annis, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks

“Electric Fencing for Bears, A highly effective deterrent” Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries

Unless otherwise noted, all American black bear photos courtesy of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service.

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