

Black Bear

Ursus americanus



Other common names

American Black Bear

Introduction

Black bears are the second largest mammal in New York, but they're actually the smallest bear species in North America. They have a reputation for sniffing out food left out by campers, and they may even get into unoccupied cars if they smell food or see coolers. They are very smart animals, and can learn from past experiences. In some areas of New York, campers are legally required to use specially designed bear resistant canisters for all food, toiletries, and garbage from April to November to reduce human-bear conflicts.

Physical Description and Anatomy

Black bears have a broad head with upright, rounded ears, small, dark eyes, a long, narrow, brown muzzle, and a short stubby tail. Their shaggy fur is usually black, with some individuals showing a white patch on their throat or chest. Their paws each have 5 digits with non-retractable claws.

When standing on all fours, black bears are 2 – 3 feet (0.6 – 0.9 m) tall at the shoulder, and 4.5 – 5 feet (1.4 – 1.5 m) long from nose to tail. They are able to stand on their hind legs, and can reach 5 – 7 feet (1.5 – 2.1 m) tall. Males weigh on average 300 lbs, (136.0 kg) and females are about 170 lbs (77.1 kg).

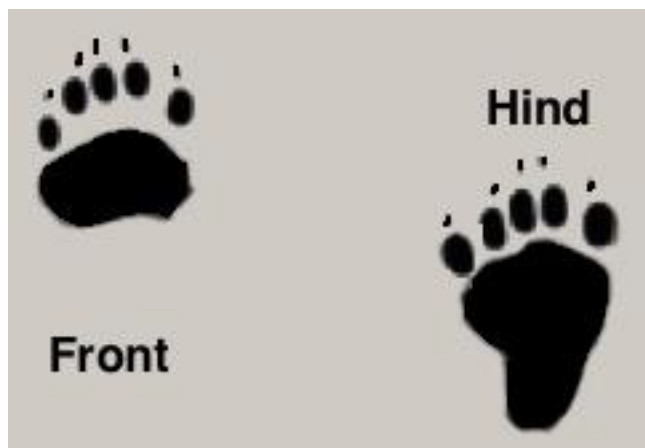


Black bear skull

Identifying features (tracks, scat, calls)

Color and size are the two main identifying features of black bears. In New York, there are no other bear species, so you won't have any trouble identifying them. Black bear tracks are some of the largest tracks you'll find in New York. Their prints show 5 toes with their non-retractable claws, and a large heel pad, with the hind tracks being longer. They often use their sturdy claws to leave scratches on trees, either to mark their territory or when climbing to get food. Their scat varies considerably with their diet. Spring black bear scat is composed mostly of vegetation, and summer scat is mostly berries. Fall scat contains more nuts and acorns, as well as apples and even corn. Black bears defecate between 6 and 8 times every day, so if bears are in the area their scat should be easy to find.

Black bears produce vocalizations to communicate, as well as during aggressive encounters when defending territory or competing for mates. Listen for grunts, forceful sighs, woofs, groans, moans, and even roars. When frightened, they may clack their teeth together, producing a chattering sound.



Black bear tracks.

Front: 5 inches long by 5 inches wide

Hind: 7 inches long by 5 inches wide



Assorted black bear scat.



Black bear track, in comparison to adult male human boot.



Black bear tracks in snow.



Black bear tracks in snow.

Habitat

Black bears inhabit temperate boreal forests, preferring a combination of dense forest cover, clearings, and wetlands. They can also be found near agricultural areas, as corn fields are an easily accessible source of food. Some black bears can even be found near semi-urban areas, and can create conflicts when they begin to associate humans with food. They require den sites during the winter months. These include rock cavities, hollow trees, large brush piles, and wind toppled trees.



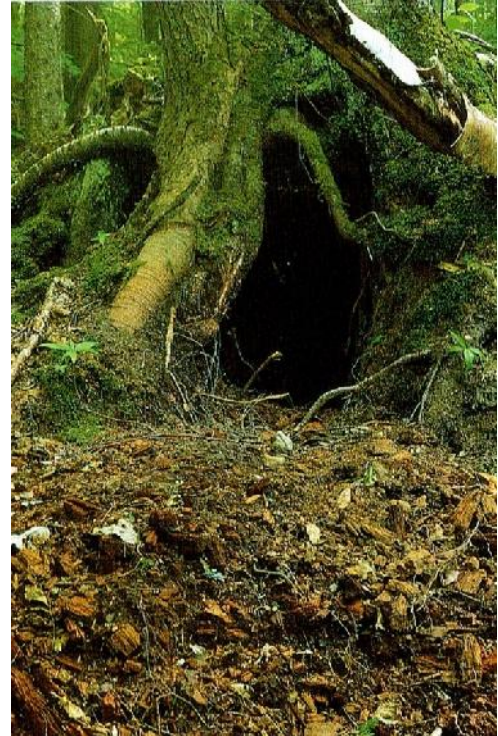
Black bear claw marks.

Behavior and Diet

Black bears are generally active at dawn and dusk. They have average eyesight, but they have acute hearing. Black bears have a very good sense of smell, which they use to hunt out a variety of food sources. They are omnivorous and opportunistic, taking advantage of just about any kind of food they come across. This includes grasses, forbs, berries, fruit, nuts, and seeds. They use their claws and powerful forearms to dig up tubers, tear apart rotten logs, and climb trees for food. They can also swim, and travel long distances in search of food. 90% of their diet is plant material, while the other 10% is mostly grubs and insects, but they will scavenge animal

carcasses given the opportunity. Their diet varies seasonally: in spring they feed on wetland plants and succulents, while in summer they eat soft mast like blueberries and raspberries, and in fall they eat hard mast like beechnuts and acorns, as well as apples.

Black bears are not true hibernators. They do enter a period of deep sleep during the winter, but they can wake up from this sleep if they are disturbed. Females enter their den and begin this period in October or November, and males begin in November or December. Onset of denning behavior is dependent upon temperature, rather than length of day. This is one big difference between true hibernators and torpor, which is what black bears experience. With climate change and warmer seasons, they may not den until later in the season. During torpor, adults do not eat, drink, urinate, or defecate. Their body temperature drops 10°F, and their metabolic rate drops 50 – 60%. They rely on fat reserves for energy during these months, losing 15 – 25% of their total body weight. Emergence from the den occurs in March and April for males, and as late as May for females.



Black bear den

Human Interactions

Habitat fragmentation and overall habitat reduction increases the occurrence of contact between humans and wildlife. Black bears are curious and intelligent, which unfortunately results in humans identifying them as “nuisance animals”. Bears are attracted to human food, including birdseed, garbage, compost, pet food, honey, corn, barbecue grills and grease traps. They will also ingest harmful materials like plastic and cleaning products, which can be extremely harmful. They will learn from experience, and once a black bear associates humans with food, it’s almost impossible to break that conditioning. Intentional feeding of black bears is illegal in New York, but human behavior tends to create a lot of food sources for bears.

Another problem occurs when humans become acclimated to the presence of these nuisance bears. People seeing black bears eating from dumpsters on a daily basis tend to forget they are wild animals and can be dangerous. Unfortunately, relocating problem bears is not a solution, as they will either use their homing ability and return to their original territory, or become a problem in their new location. The best solution is to remove temptation and reducing bear attractants, including properly storing waste, keeping pet food inside, and cleaning grills after every use.

Reproduction

Black bears are solitary and polygamous, only associating with other adults during mating season. Females are sexually mature at 2 – 5 years, and males at 4 – 6 years. Breeding occurs from late May through August, but the embryo does not become implanted in the uterus until November or December. Litters of 2 – 3 cubs are born in January and February, when females are still in their winter den. Cubs are born blind and toothless, with fine gray hair. They open their eyes at 4 – 6 weeks, and leave the den at 2 months, but the mother continues nursing them until 7 months of age. A female with cubs can be very aggressive in defense of her young, which is one reason you should be wary when tracking black bears. Cubs stay with their mother for over a year, dispersing as yearlings in their second spring or summer. Females usually breed every other year, and the lifespan of both males and females is anywhere from 10 – 30 years.

Fun Facts

Black bears can run 25 – 35 mph (40.2 – 56.3 kph).

The oldest black bear in New York, determined using tooth analysis, was 42 years old.

Black bears are able to stand on their hind legs, and do this to get a better view of their surroundings.

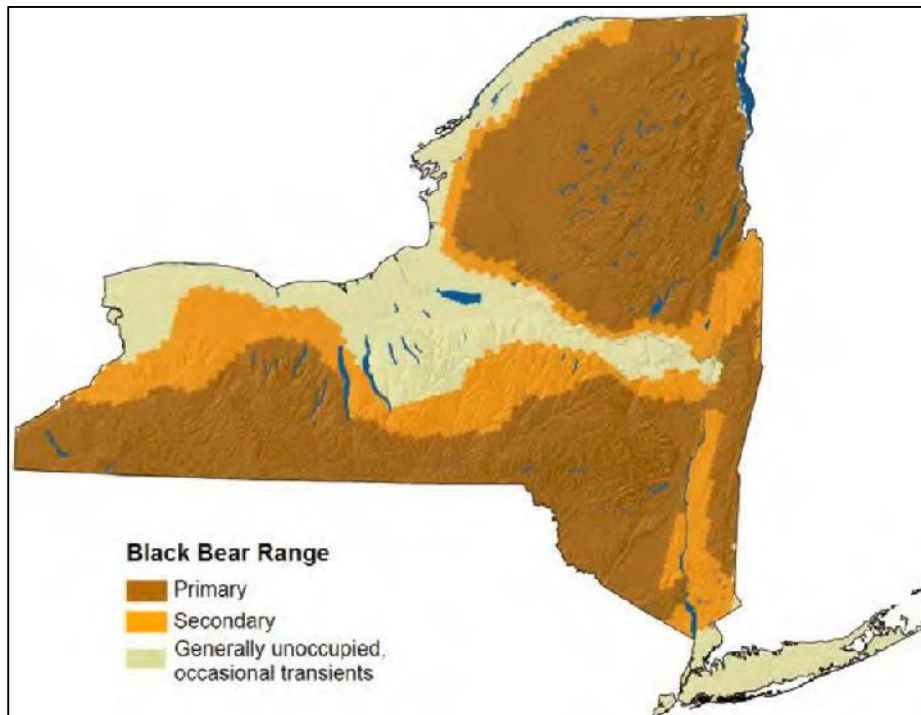
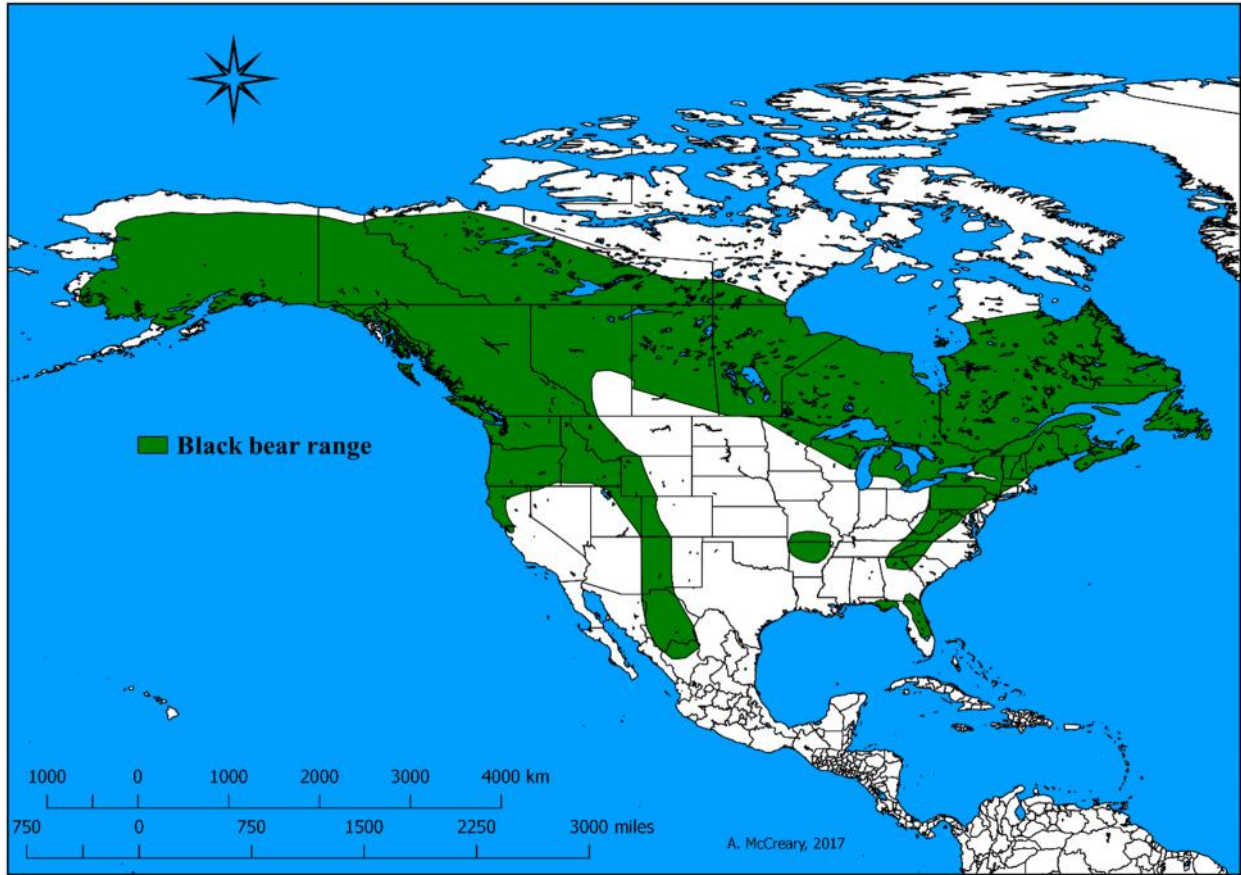
Black bears can swim, and they're also very good at climbing trees.

Range and Status

Black bears were previously found across most of North America, from Alaska and Canada south to parts of northern Mexico. Their range has since become restricted due to development and habitat fragmentation, but in some areas populations are rebounding in response to conservation and forest restoration programs.

In New York, black bears are found throughout nearly the entire state, including near semi-urban populations, except for Long Island, Albany, and Buffalo. Some portions of the state do not have resident populations, but transients may be spotted as they travel to find new habitat. Population estimates for the state are from 6,000-8,000, but surveys focus on areas where hunting is permitted. Total population is believed to be higher.

Current threats to black bears include habitat reduction and fragmentation. While not as common as with deer, vehicle collisions are a cause of mortality in black bears, especially in years with drought and other poor conditions that reduce the abundance of food. Additionally, many bear species are targeted by illegal poachers for their gall bladders, which are used in some traditional medicines.



Black bear range in New York.

Management and Research in New York

Hunting of black bears is permitted in New York State, and populations are managed to ensure sustainable harvesting while reducing human-bear conflicts. The black bear response manual, detailing actions to take in response to nuisance bears, was published in 2011, and the black bear management plan was published in 2014.

At Dyken Pond

Black bears are periodically spotted from spring through fall at the Center. We often see them foraging in blueberry patches during the summer. Black bears are known to frequent homes when they first awaken hungry in spring. Being opportunistic, they search for the easiest meal they can find, which includes bird seed at feeders, compost piles, grills, bee hives, and garbage cans. If you live in bear country, it is recommended that bird feeders are taken down by early spring.

Links

More information on black bears can be found at the following links:

DEC Black Bear Management Plan

http://www.dec.ny.gov/docs/wildlife_pdf/bearplan2014.pdf

DEC Black Bears in New York: Natural History, Range, and Interactions with People

http://www.dec.ny.gov/docs/wildlife_pdf/bbnathis.pdf

DEC Black Bear Response Manual

http://www.dec.ny.gov/docs/wildlife_pdf/bearsopm.pdf

DEC Black Bear Encounters

<http://www.dec.ny.gov/animals/94710.html>

DEC Reducing Human-Bear Conflicts

<http://www.dec.ny.gov/animals/6995.html#Backcountry>

DEC Bear Hunting Information

<http://www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/7857.html>

DEC Hunting the Black Bear in New York

http://www.dec.ny.gov/docs/wildlife_pdf/bbhunting10.pdf

Sources

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