

## Black Bear Management

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) has the responsibility to conserve our bear populations. Washington residents enjoy knowing that healthy numbers of bears roam our forests. Some people seek out these wary animals as one of our most sought after game species. In past decades, western Washington black bears were routinely killed in large numbers to control damage that they cause by feeding on young Douglas-fir trees. Black bear populations have rebounded from these damage control activities and populations have nearly doubled since the early 1970's. Our increasing human population and encroachment into bear habitat creates new management challenges. The WDFW is responding to roughly 500 complaints a year regarding urban sightings and property damage, attacks on livestock, and bear-human confrontations. The Department believes that the most effective ways to address human-bear conflict are through public education, addressing problem animals and hunting.



To learn more about black bears in Washington, contact the:  
**Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife  
Wildlife Management Program**  
(360) 902-2515

**Mailing Address:**  
600 Capitol Way N., MS-43200  
Olympia, WA 98501-1091

**Office Location:**  
Natural Resources Building  
1111 Washington St. S.E., Olympia, WA

To report attacks, damage or depredation by black bears, contact your local state patrol office.

**POACHING HOTLINE**  
1-800-477-6224



Washington  
Department of  
**FISH and  
WILDLIFE**

**Living**  
with wildlife  
IN WASHINGTON

# Black Bears



At least 25,000 black bears inhabit the Evergreen State. Unlike its rare cousin the grizzly bear, black bears are abundant in Washington. In fact, Washington ranks within the top five of the lower 48 states in total black bear population. For each grizzly in Washington, there are at least 700 black bears. At 150-225 pounds on average, the black bear is the *smallest* member of the bear family. Don't let the name fool you, however. Black bears are not always black. Their thick coats may range from black to cinnamon to blonde in color.



Black bears are solitary animals and most active generally at dawn and dusk. Although black bears will eat insects and small animals, including deer fawns and elk calves, over 80 percent of their diet consists of grasses, berries, nuts, tubers and wood fiber. Black bears are infamous opportunists. Their extremely keen sense of smell and innate curiosity make them skilled scavengers. They are notorious for rummaging through garbage cans, snatching pet food from porches, breaking into cabins in search of food, and raiding camps.



Black bear front tracks are 3 1/2" to 5" wide and 4 1/2" in length, while the rear tracks are 3 1/2" to 4 3/4" in width and 7" to 8" in length.

Black bears den up during the cold winter months when food runs scarce and weather turns harsh. Although the bear's metabolic rate slows during its winter dormancy, it is not considered a true hibernator. The bear's body temperature remains fairly normal and the animal can be easily awakened. While in the den, females, also called sows, normally give birth to two cubs every other year. Sows will care for their young ones for about 15 months before sending them off on their own.

## Black Bear Country

Ranging from Alaska to central Mexico, black bears are the most common and widely distributed of the bears in North America. In Washington, the best black bear habitat and highest densities of bears are on the peninsula, in the Cascade Mountains, in the Selkirk Mountains of northeastern Washington, and in the Blue Mountains of the south-east. The bears make their homes in forested foothills and mountains where food and heavy cover are plentiful. Black bears move in response to the seasonal availability of food. Males roam widely with no particular pattern, while females, often with cubs, will maintain a home range small enough to defend. As with so many other wildlife species in the Evergreen State, habitat loss through development and other land uses remains the biggest threat to black bear numbers.



## Close Encounters

Black bears are not normally aggressive animals, so attacks on humans are rare. As bear numbers increase and more bear habitat disappears, however, the greater the chances are of encountering a black bear. In North America approximately 45 fatalities have been attributed to black bears since 1900. More than half of those fatalities have happened since 1970. Although historic information regarding black bear attacks in Washington is not well documented, one fatality and three attacks have been recorded.

Bears will usually avoid people, but their size, strength and surprising speed make them a potential danger. Most confrontations with bears are a result of surprise encounters at close range, so take precautions to avoid startling a bear. Remember, because of their keen sense of smell, black bears are attracted to food and odors.

**If you live in or near wooded black bear habitat you can reduce the potential for a black bear conflict by taking these precautions:**

- Don't leave food out that bears can get into. Keep pet foods and livestock feed indoors.

- Store garbage in cans with tight-fitting lids and store cans in your garage or a shed until pick-up day.
- Wash barbecue grills immediately after use, and keep any fish parts and meat waste in your freezer until they can be disposed of properly.

- Lastly, enclose any beehives and fruit trees in chain-link or electric fencing where practicable to prevent depredation.

### To avoid encounters with black bears while hiking and camping:

- Hike in small groups and make your presence known by singing or talking. If approaching likely bear habitat, consider an upwind approach so the bear will smell you and leave the immediate area. Avoid hiking alone, after dark, or with a dog. Dogs may disturb bears and lead them back to you.
- Keep small children close and on the trail, preferably in plain sight just ahead of you.
- Be aware of your surroundings, particularly when hiking in forested areas. Look for tracks, droppings and feeding sign, such as over turned rocks, peeled trees or torn-open stumps indicating that bears are in the area. If you find yourself in an active bear area, move through quickly.
- Keep a clean camp. Put garbage, including soiled diapers and tampons, in bear-proof trash containers where available, or pack it out in double plastic bags. Do not bury or burn your garbage, as bears will still be attracted to the residual smell.
- Reduce odors that may attract black bears by storing meat, other foods, horse pellets and dog food in double plastic bags. Store double-wrapped food in your car trunk, if possible. Otherwise, put food in a backpack or appropriate container and hang from a tree branch at least 10 feet above the ground and 4 feet out from the tree trunk. Never store food in your tent.
- When camping, avoid cooking smelly or greasy foods, such as bacon. Sleep at least 100 yards



from your cooking area and food storage site. Don't sleep in your cooking clothes and keep your sleeping bag and tent clean and free of food odors.

- If hunting, hang game meat out of reach of bears, if possible. If not, store meat 100 yards from camp.
- Dispose of fish entrails by puncturing the air bladder and dropping the entrails in deep water where they will decompose naturally.

Based on their abundance in Washington, if you spend time outdoors your chances of seeing a black bear are fairly good. Should you spot a bear — and it doesn't see you — quickly and quietly leave the immediate area. **Black bears tend to avoid humans, but should you come in close contact with one, here are some tips.**

- Stay calm and avoid direct eye contact, which could elicit a charge. Because bears are nearsighted, if one has not caught your scent, it could mistake you for prey. Try to stay upwind and identify yourself as a human by standing up, waving your hands above your head, and talking. The bear will probably leave you alone.
- Do not approach the bear, especially if cubs are around. Give the bear plenty of room and slowly back away. Leave the bear an escape route at all times. If you are too close, a black bear may "bluff" charge, although it is highly unlikely the bear would touch you. Because black bears can reach speeds of 30 mph or more, running away is not a wise decision. Running may also stimulate the bear's instinct to chase.

- If you cannot safely move away from the bear and the bear doesn't flee, then try to scare it away by aggressively clapping your hands, or yelling. Black bears can climb trees, fleeing up a tree is not a safe option.
- In the unlikely event a black bear attacks you (meaning he thinks you are prey), fight back aggressively using your bare hands or any object you can reach. As a last resort, should the attack continue, protect yourself by curling into a ball or lying flat on the ground on your stomach and playing dead. Do not look up or move until you are certain the bear is gone.

## Facing The Facts



### Common names:

Black bear, bruin

### Scientific name:

*Ursus americanus*

### Size

Adults range from 5 to 6 feet long, and 2 to 3 feet tall at the shoulder.

### Weight

Adult males average 225 pounds, adult females average 130 pounds, and yearlings are typically 60 to 75 pounds.

### Color

Black bears range in color from black, brown, cinnamon and reddish-blond. They have a brown muzzle and often a blaze (small patch of white) on the breast. The profile of the face is straight or "Roman," not dished like a grizzly bear's.

### Range/Habitat

Black bears live in forested foothills and mountains. The best black bear habitat in the state is in western and northeastern Washington, and the Blue Mountains of the southeast.

### Abundance

More than 600,000 black bears reside in North America, of which at least 25,000 black bears are estimated to inhabit Washington.

### Food

Black bears are omnivores, meaning they eat both plants and animals. Their diet consists of grasses; berries; nuts; tubers; wood fiber; insects; small mammals, including deer fawns and elk calves; eggs; honey; carrion (dead animals); fish; and occasionally livestock.

### Habits

Black bears are primarily crepuscular (active at dawn and dusk) and solitary animals, except for sows (females) with cubs. Black bears may den from mid-October into April in tree cavities, hollow logs, beneath roots of down trees, and in rock outcrops. Black bears are not true hibernators and may move from den to den in more mild winter climates. Some bears in coastal Washington may remain active throughout the winter.

### Life span

Black bears may live 20 years or more in the wild and 30 years in captivity.

### Breeding

Black bears normally breed for the first time at 3.5-5.5 years of age. Females have one litter every other year, the gestation period being 7 to 7.5 months. Breeding season runs from about mid-June through mid-July in Washington. All members of the bear family experience "delayed implantation." Females conceive during the summer, but development is delayed until mid-November or December, just two months before the cubs are born.

### Young

Females normally give birth to two cubs. Cubs are born in the winter den during January or February. Newborns weigh less than a pound. Though weaned in August, cubs remain with their mothers for about 15 months.