

Bear, Black



In Yellowstone, about 50 percent of black bears (*Ursus americanus*) are black in color, others are brown, blonde, and cinnamon. They stand about 3 feet high at the shoulder. Males weigh 210–315 pounds; females weigh 135–200 pounds. They have fair eyesight and an exceptional sense of smell.

Black bears eat almost anything, including grass, fruits, tree cambium, eggs, insects, fish, elk calves, and carrion. Their short, curved claws enable them to climb trees, but do not allow them to dig for roots or ants as well as a grizzly bear can. (Grizzlies have longer, less-curved claws.)

During fall and early winter, black bears spend most of their time feeding, in a pre-denning period known as “hyperphagia.” In November they locate or excavate a den on north-facing slopes between 5,800–8,600 feet. There, they hibernate until late March.

Most scientists consider bears to be true hibernators. Some hibernating animals experience an extreme drop in metabolism with a cooling of body temperature and near stoppage of respiration and circulation. Bears undergo these changes less than some other species, and they can be easily roused from hibernation.

Males and females without cubs are solitary, except during the mating season, May to early July. They may mate with a number of individuals, but occasionally a pair stays together for the entire period. Both genders usually begin breeding at age four.

After fertilization, the barely developed blastocyst (egg) does not immediately implant in the uterus, a process called “delayed implantation.” If the bear is healthy when she dens for the winter, implantation and development will begin; if not, her body will abort the blastocyst. Total gestation time is 200 to 220 days, but only during the last half of this period does fetal development occur.

As of January 2009 . . .

Number in Yellowstone
500–650, estimate

Where to see
Tower and Mammoth areas, most often.

Behavior & Size

- Males weigh 210–315 pounds, females weigh 135–200 pounds; adults stand about 3 feet at the shoulder.
- May live 15–30 years.
- Home range: male, 6–124 square miles, female, 2–45 square miles.
- Can climb trees; adapted to life in forest and along forest edges.
- Food includes rodents, insects, elk calves, cutthroat trout, pine nuts, grasses and other vegetation.
- Mates in spring; gives birth the following winter to 1–3 cubs.
- Considered true hibernators.

History

- Like grizzlies, used to be fed at dumps within the park.
- For years, black bears were fed by visitors from vehicles.
- Both of these actions resulted in bears losing fear of humans and pursuing human food, which resulted in visitor injuries, property damage, and the need to destroy “problem bears.”

Management Status

- 2000, study begun to find out how black bears fit into the mix of northern range predators; twelve black bears have been radio-collared.

See “Bear Management” in Chapter 8.

Birth occurs in mid-January to early February; the female becomes semiconscious during delivery. Usually two cubs are born. At birth, the cubs are blind, toothless, and almost hairless. After delivery the mother continues to sleep for another two months while the cubs suckle and sleep.

After emerging from the den, the cubs and their mother roam over her home territory. The bears have no regular summer den, but they often dig shallow depressions—day beds—near abundant food sources. In the fall, the cubs den with their mother. The following spring, the cubs and mother separate.

When faced with a threat, black bears are likely to retreat up a tree or flee, rather than reacting aggressively. However, any bear, particularly a female with cubs, may attack when surprised at close range. Black bears occasionally stalk and kill humans—although this is rare. Whether it’s a grizzly or a black bear, always give these animals a wide berth.