

# WILDLIFE IN CONNECTICUT

## INFORMATIONAL SERIES

### BLACK BEAR

*Ursus americanus*

#### **Background Information**

Black bears are impressive animals. Even a long-distance glimpse of one foraging in a woodland is an unforgettable experience for most outdoor enthusiasts. However, getting a glimpse of a bear in Connecticut was once unlikely because bears were extirpated from the state beginning in the mid-1800s. Since then, bears have made a comeback. Their return is due, in part, to the regrowth of forestland throughout the region following the abandonment of farms during the late 1800s. Beginning in the 1980s, the DEP Wildlife Division had evidence of a resident population. Since then, annual sighting reports have increased dramatically, indicating a rapid increase in the bear population. With the number of bears increasing in the state, it is important for residents to learn the facts about black bears and how to coexist with them.

#### **Description**

The black bear is a stocky animal with short, thick legs. It is the smallest North American bear. In Connecticut, adult males, or boars, normally weigh from 150 to 400 pounds, while females, or sows, weigh from 110 to 200 pounds. Yearlings weigh 45 to 100 pounds. Adults are five to six feet long.

The black bear's coat is typically glossy black or brownish black, except for the muzzle, which is tan. There is sometimes a small, white patch on the chest. In western North America some black bears are brown or cinnamon. Black bears have five toes with large claws on all feet. Bear tracks resemble human tracks, but the front feet are shorter than the rear. A bear's tail is short, from three to five inches long. The sexes are similar in appearance, although males are usually larger.

#### **Habitat and Diet**

Black bear habitat is forestland, usually with deciduous and coniferous trees, as well as streams, swamps and rock ledges. Bears prefer areas with thick understory vegetation and abundant food resources. Mature forests provide soft and hard mast in late summer and fall. Wetlands are particularly important

in spring when emerging plants are one of the few available foods. Bears are omnivorous; they eat grasses, forbs, fruits, nuts and berries. They occasionally will prey on small mammals, deer and livestock. Bears will also seek insects (particularly ants and bees), scavenge carrion, and raid bird feeders and garbage cans.

#### **Life History**

Breeding occurs during summer, usually in late June or early July. During this time, males travel extensively in



*Black bears live in woodland habitats.*

search of females. The age when sows first produce cubs is related to the available food supply, but most begin to reproduce at age three or four and continue to have young every two years. Bears do not form long-lasting bonds, so the males may mate with more than one female during the breeding season. Fighting may occur between rival males as well as between males and unreceptive females.

Young are born in the den during January or February and are blind, toothless and covered with fine hair. Cubs weigh six to 12 ounces at birth. Litter sizes range from one to four cubs, with litters of two or three being most common. After giving birth, the sow usually continues her winter rest while the cubs are awake and nursing. Only females rear the young. Cubs are weaned when they are about seven months old and will remain with the female until the second summer of their lives. Then, the young bears, especially the males, may travel great distances in search of their own territories. Yearling females frequently settle near their mother's home range. Young bears are often forced into less preferred habitat.

### ***Interesting Facts***

The black bear is an intelligent animal with keen senses of smell and hearing. It can detect the slightest aroma of food, which may lead the bear to campsites and near homes. Odor from carelessly stored food and garbage can lure bears long distances. Black bears travel and feed primarily at night, but can be active any time of the day. Climatic factors, such as drought, may result in a food shortage, causing bears to travel many miles in search of food.

Black bears are generally shy and secretive and usually fearful of humans.

However, if they regularly find food near houses and areas of human activity, they can lose their fear of humans. Unlike grizzly bears, black bears are seldom aggressive towards humans.

Females with cubs tend to have restricted home ranges which average six to 19 square miles, while males move



***Black bears are excellent tree climbers.***

about widely in home ranges of 12 to 60 square miles. The size of a home range varies geographically and often depends on the quality of habitat. Most ranges are used by more than one bear, but specific areas are rarely used at the same time. Male and female ranges can overlap, but overlap among the same sex is less common. In their home territories, bears may mark trees (called "bear trees") along their travel routes by clawing and biting the bark. Black bears are good tree climbers and strong swimmers. They can also run up to 35 miles per hour.

Black bears are not classified as true hibernators but their body temperature is lowered and heart rate slowed during winter denning. Denning enables bears to overcome unfavorable weather conditions and lack of food during winter. Denning bears do not eat, drink, urinate or defecate. However, they will usually wake up if disturbed during their winter dormancy. Bears commonly den under fallen trees or in brush piles, but varied sites are used, including rocky ledges. Most dens are lined with leaves, grass, lichens, ferns or rotted wood.

### ***Bear Management***

As Connecticut's bear population continues to increase, more bears, particularly young bears, will be seen near residential areas. The DEP's response will depend on the specifics of each bear situation. The mere presence of a bear does not necessitate its removal. In most cases, if left alone, the bear will make its way to more a natural habitat. Removing food attractants, such as bird feeders, reduces the chance that bears will go near homes. The DEP seldom relocates bears. An exception is the removal of a bear from an urban location when there is little likelihood that it can leave safely on its own and when the bear is in a position where it can be safely immobilized. DEP Tranquilizing Teams, consisting of conservation officers and wildlife biologists, are trained and equipped to immobilize wildlife. Bears cannot be relocated to another state because no other state is accepting bears for release. Bears that have persistent, serious, negative behavior, such as killing protected livestock or entering buildings, may have to be destroyed.

As bears become more regular residents of Connecticut towns, it is important that people learn to adapt to the presence of bears and take measures to avoid damage and problems. **By not taking precautions, humans can reinforce problem behavior by bears, which may lead to bears being removed or destroyed.**

### ***Living with Bears***

Much of Connecticut's landscape is now forested and is suitable for black bears. The rapid increase in the bear population between the 1980s and early 2000s is expected to continue. As the bear population expands, human/bear interactions will increase. People should learn what to do if they see a bear and how to avoid unnecessary conflicts by keeping food away from bears.

### ***Bears near your home***

In wilderness settings bears usually avoid people. But food attractants near homes can cause them to grow habituated to humans and disturbances, such as dogs and other noises. Bears are attracted by bird feeders, garbage, pet food that is

left outside, compost piles, fruit trees, and berry-producing shrubs.

To avoid attracting bears:

- Remove bird feeders from late March through November.
- Place garbage cans inside a garage or shed until the morning of pickup. Ammonia can be added to the can to make the contents unpalatable. Garbage should be disposed of regularly or it will begin to smell and attract bears. Never leave fish parts, meat bones or other meat by-products where a bear's sensitive nose can find them.
- Store pet and livestock foods inside and in airtight containers.
- Do not put meats or sweet-smelling fruit rinds in compost piles. Lime can be sprinkled on the compost pile to reduce the smell and discourage bears.
- Clean and store backyard grills inside a shed or garage after use.
- Never intentionally feed bears. Bears that become accustomed to finding food near your home may become "problem" bears at someone else's home.

If you see a bear on your property you can either leave the bear alone and wait for it to leave or make loud noises from a safe distance to scare the bear away.

### ***Bears seen while hiking or camping***

Black bear attacks on humans are exceptionally rare. In most hiking areas, bears normally leave once they have sensed a human. However, at campsites and campgrounds bears can be attracted by poorly stored food and garbage. If you see a bear when hiking or camping, make your presence known by making noise and waving your arms. If you surprise a bear at close range, walk away slowly while facing the bear. Avoid direct eye contact and do not run because the bear may run after you. Try to stay calm as you make your retreat. Black bears will sometimes bluff charge to



***Black bears frequently destroy bird feeders in their quest for an easy meal.***

within a few feet of you when they feel threatened. If this happens, stand your ground and shout at the bear. Do not climb a tree because black bears are excellent tree climbers. Make sure your dog is on a leash and under control.

Sometimes bears are attracted to food that is prepared outside. Do not cook near your tent or store food inside your tent. Instead, keep your food in a vehicle or use a rope to suspend it 10 or more feet off the ground and away from tree trunks. Even clothes that you have cooked in should be stored out of a bear's reach.

### ***Bears, livestock and beehives***

Bears occasionally attack livestock and damage beehives. Livestock can be protected with electric fencing or by moving them into a secure building at night. Beehives can also be protected with electric fencing or wired together with metal strapping.

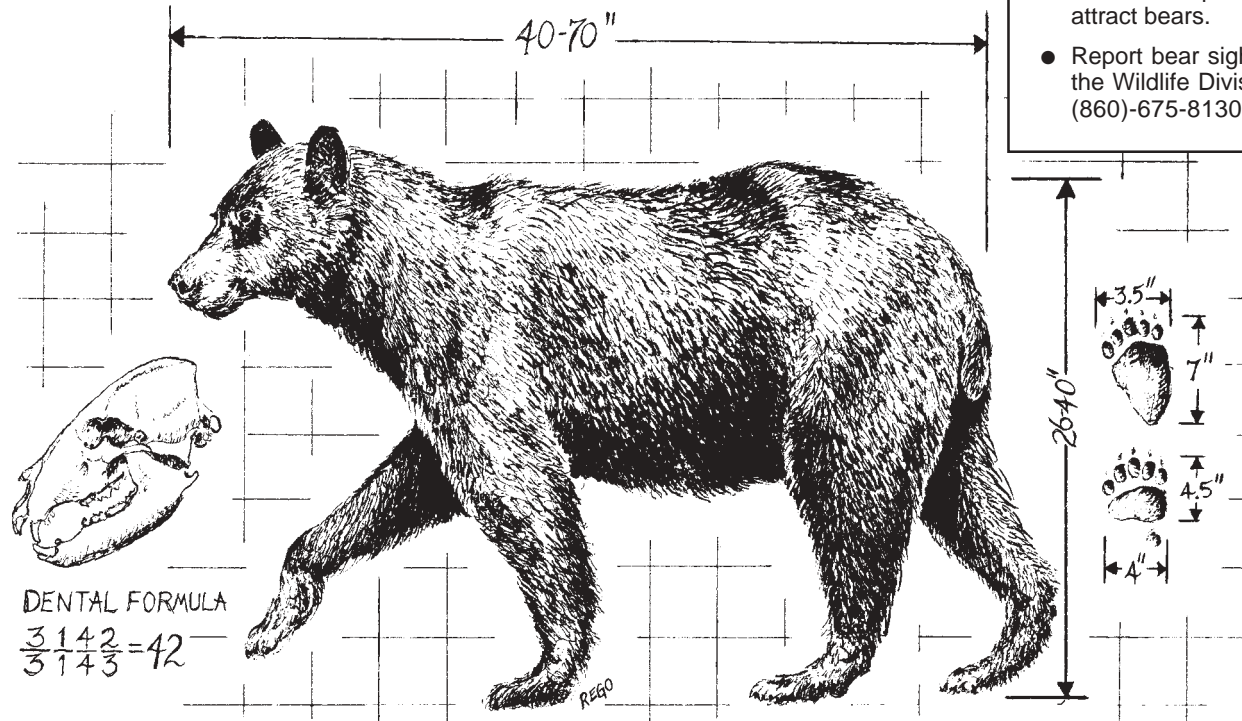


## ***Be Bear Aware***

***Taking precautions will minimize conflicts between humans and bears. It is important to understand that all bears are not alike and what works to scare one bear may not work with another, especially if the bear is habituated to humans. Bears should be respected not feared.***



## Blueprint for a Black Bear



- If you see a bear:**
- Enjoy it from a distance.
  - Advertise your presence by shouting and waving your arms or walk slowly away.
  - Never attempt to feed or attract bears.
  - Report bear sightings to the Wildlife Division, at (860)-675-8130.

**Weight:** Males, normally 150-400 lbs.; females, 110-200 lbs.; yearlings, 45 -100 lbs.

**Body Characteristics:** Stocky, with short, thick legs.

**Color:** Varies in color from black to brown; tan around the muzzle and occasionally has a white chest patch.

**Locomotion:** Plantigrade (walks on whole foot). Usually walks with a shuffling gait but can run at speeds of over 30 mph. Agile climber.

**Senses:** Exceptional hearing and smell, poorer sight.

**Diet:** Grasses, forbs, fruit, nuts and berries. Occasionally preys on small mammals, rarely deer and livestock. Also seeks insects (ants, bees), scavenges carrion and raids garbage cans and bird feeders.

**Habitat:** Mixed deciduous-coniferous forests with mast-producing overstories and understories, marshes and thickets.

**Social Behavior:** Breeding occurs in early summer. Males may breed with several females, but are solitary in the non-breeding season. Females give birth while

denning, usually in January. Cubs remain with the female for 1 1/2 years. Adult females breed every other year, less often in poorer habitat. Bears are most active at night. Often avoid humans but can be habituated by food sources found near homes.

**Connecticut Population:** Increasing. Estimated to be several hundred resident bears, primarily in northwestern Connecticut. Additional nonresident yearlings wander to and from western Massachusetts.



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