



Wildlife Notes

Black Bear (*Ursus americanus*)

Range and Population

New Mexico's state animal, the black bear, lives at higher elevations in mountainous regions, preferring forest woodlands with grass meadows. Often within a few miles of areas occupied by humans, an estimated 6,000 black bears can be found spread over more than 13 percent of the open lands in New Mexico.



A Famous Resident

After a 17,000-acre fire in the Lincoln National Forest, New Mexico fire fighters found an orphaned black bear that had miraculously survived high in a tree. Given the name Smokey Bear, it soon became a national symbol for forest-fire prevention and was relocated to the National Zoo in Washington, D.C. Millions visited Smokey there, and due to his popularity (and the high volume of mail) the U.S. Postal Service in 1964 issued him a personal zip code.

A History of Survival

The black bear and its cousin, the grizzly bear (*Ursus arctos horribilis*) once roamed throughout the Southwest, but unfortunately by 1930 grizzly were extinct. Fortunately as a result of federal law passed in 1927, the black bear has survived, and today it may only be hunted by license during hunting season.

Description

Black bears are large and powerful animals. Grown males can weigh more than 300 pounds and measure six feet in length. Sometimes also colored cinnamon or brown, the black bear has a pointed nose, high-set ears and long, sharp, curved claws. Walking plantigrade (flat-footed), the usually slow shuffling black bear can move rapidly (30mph/50kmh) for short distances.

Bear Aware

Signs a bear may be in the area include: trees with long scratch marks or horizontal teeth marks (about five feet above the ground) to define territory; overturned boulders or logs and stumps torn apart to search for grubs and insects; tufts of fur left on saplings and larger trees to mark scent; and especially scat (excrement)—usually left in six-inch wide piles of two-inch wide clumps.



Photo by Dan Williams.

Diet

Omnivores, black bears eat almost anything available (i.e. insects, nuts and berries, plant matter, fish, birds, small mammals and carrion), but rarely kill larger prey.

When natural food sources become unavailable from environmental stress such as drought, black bear may turn to available human sources, such as trash cans, gardens and fruit trees.

Hibernation

Black bears sleep soundly during winter in caves, forest shelters or depressions in the terrain, but may rouse to lie in the sun or feed. Even though the body temperature during hibernation is only 35°C, a bear still can respond to disturbances.

While hibernating a bear does not need to drink or urinate and accomplishes some amazing metabolic feats. For example, black bears do not concentrate urea in their blood, but instead convert it into a nontoxic substance, called creatine. Nitrogen waste is recycled into protein, and sows (females) awake during hibernation to give birth.

Breeding

Female black bears reach sexual maturity at 3–4 years of age and breed only in alternate years. Black bears mate from June–August, but insemination is delayed until November. Usually, 2–3 cubs are born, but occasionally as many as four. A newborn cub is the size of an adult squirrel and weighs less than a pound. By the time the mother emerges from dormancy, cubs are mobile and will stay with the mother for up to two years. As young mature, they become independent to continue a solitary existence—meeting with other black bears only to breed.



Photo by Dan Williams.

Management and Hunting

Black bears are managed to maintain healthy and sustainable populations, while also balancing public interest in wildlife viewing and hunting. Hunting seasons occur in late-August and October–November for any weapon and September for bow only.

Problem bears do occur and must be relocated if a threat to public safety. Bears that become repeat offender are dangerous and sometimes must be euthanized. Therefore, it is a public responsibility not to attract bears.

Don't Attract Bears

- Keep a clean camp.
- Store food and garbage securely.
- Don't store food in tents.
- Cook away from where you sleep.
- Wash or change clothing before sleeping.

If you have a bear encounter:

- Remain calm.
- Do not run.
- Back away slowly.
- Stay away from cubs.
- Fight back aggressively if attacked.



New Mexico Department of Game and Fish

Conserving New Mexico's Wildlife for Future Generations

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Bear Emergency
(505) 827-9376
Anywhere in New Mexico
For more information visit www.wildlife.state.nm.us
or telephone toll-free 1-888-248-6866.

Be Bear Aware
Track Your Trash

- Put out garbage **ONLY** on the morning of pickup.
- Put trash in bear-proof containers.
- Keep BBQ grills clean and stored inside.
- Store food items out-of-reach and smell of bears.
- Bring bird feeders in at night.
- Keep pet food inside.

New Mexico Department of Game and Fish
Conserving New Mexico's Wildlife - Buy a Hunting, Fishing or Trapping License & Give to the Share With Wildlife Program!