

# BLACK BEARS OF NEW MEXICO



From Paleolithic times to the present, bears have fascinated humans. However, all too often, our interest in bears is misinformed and marred by inaccurate beliefs.

On the one hand, we feel a kinship with bears, due partly to the traits we have in common. Bears stand erect on the soles of their feet, sit on their rumps and have shoulder joints which allow free rotation of limbs. Like us, they are omnivorous, eating both plants and animals. Bears can use their front paws like hands, and their eyes are nearly aligned in a frontal plane. Their hind paw prints look uncannily like a barefoot human print. In addition, bears occupy a distinct, often exalted place in folklore, mythology, legend and literature. Many indigenous cultures in the Southwest have incorporated bears into their system of beliefs. They share a belief that bears possess wisdom and power. Hunting customs, ceremonial feasts, and the depiction of bears in art, song, story and dance highlight the importance of bears to Native cultures.



Their popularization in the form of cuddly teddy bears such as Pooh and Yogi has helped create a potentially dangerous misconception in the minds of children as well as adults. Associating these fictional bears with wild bears regularly leads people to risk serious harm in their attempt to befriend these powerful wild mammals.

On the other hand, many of us also have a deep fear of bears. Sensational depictions of bears in movies, stories, and tall tales misrepresent actual bear behavior. Such stories leave us with the equally erroneous impression of the bear's ferocity and viciousness.

Actually, the factual information about these remarkable animals is more fascinating than our romantic and sensational misconceptions of bears.



## ISTORY

Historically, both black bears and grizzlies lived in New Mexico. Grizzlies were common in open grasslands as well as in forested areas. Currently, our black bear population is estimated at 5,000-6,000. Why have black bears managed to survive while grizzlies have not?

Grizzlies are more aggressive than black bears. Grizzlies evolved primarily on the plains where cover is scarce so they tend to stand and fight rather than flee. They are more predatory and carnivorous than black bears. Grizzlies found easy prey when Spanish settlers brought their cattle and sheep to New Mexico. In order to protect the ranching industry (especially wool growers), government and private bear trappers were granted unlimited hunting, trapping and poisoning privileges. At the same time, much of grizzly bear habitat in New Mexico was converted to grazing land and other uses. In 1927 the New Mexico Legislature passed a law adding grizzlies to the list of protected big game species but it was already too late for them. Their numbers were too small and their reproductive rates too low for them to recover. The last recorded grizzly in New Mexico was killed in 1931 north of Silver City.

By contrast, black bears are more reclusive animals. They evolved in the forests where flight behavior (scrambling up a tree) rather than confrontation proved to be a more successful strategy in dealing with humans. Black bears overall are smaller and more agile for climbing than grizzly bears. This allows black bears to forage in dense, hidden areas.



## SCRIPTION

The name 'black bear' can be misleading. New Mexico's black bears actually come in a variety of color phases ranging from black and brown, to cinnamon (the most common color), reddish and blonde.

An adult male black bear can weigh up to 400 pounds, though the average male weighs about 250 pounds. Female black bears typically weigh between 150 and 180 pounds. Their powerful limbs each have five toes and five short, curved claws for digging and cutting. Their front feet are about as long as they are wide, but the hind feet are long and narrow and resemble a human foot. Black bears have strong muscular necks and are very adept climbers. Black bears can scramble up a tree with remarkable ease!



*Young black bear*



*Adult male black bear*

Black bears' potential life span may exceed more than 30 years. In New Mexico, bears have been documented to live 20-25 years. In most of their range where they are hunted the average life span is about 7-8 years. Their most frequent causes of death are hunting by humans, predation by other bears, and their becoming a nuisance by getting used to human food and subsequently having to be killed.



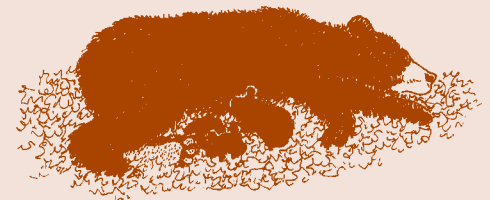
## EPRODUCTION

The black bear is not a threatened or endangered species in the West. However, because of its mating habits and reproductive cycle, bear populations are watched closely. Bear breeding in New Mexico generally doesn't begin until an animal is 5-6 years old, and a female who successfully raises cubs will mate only once every two years. For this reason, wildlife management policies take care to prevent over-hunting of black bears. In New Mexico, black bears breed between mid-May and July but give birth in the winter in the den. The reason is the delayed implantation of the egg. Though fertilized, the egg remains a cluster of

cells and doesn't implant itself into the uterine wall until mid-November. Embryos may not develop at all if the female doesn't have enough body fat by the time fall arrives.

Females give birth in January or February with a litter size of one to two cubs. Newborns are about the size of a mouse and weigh just six to eight ounces. The newborn bears are blind and helpless and purr while they nurse. Within a month, they will weigh between 2-2 1/2 pounds.

Mother bears provide excellent den care, and infant mortalities are rare. By the time they venture out of the den in April or May, the cubs weigh six to seven pounds.



# HABITAT



## FOOD and WATER

Riparian areas are important to black bears. They provide valuable cover for travel and foraging as well as water for drinking, fishing and play. On warm days you may be lucky and see bears wallowing in springs and creeks.

Being omnivorous and opportunistic, black bears have a diet that varies according to seasonal availability of foods. In spring, the diet is mostly fresh grasses and forbs, young succulent shoots, roots, insects and carrion. In summer, young grasses, forbs, insects, berries and fruit are primary sources of nourishment. Like humans, bears cannot convert cellulose into an absorbable form and so the mature plants and grasses of summer cannot be properly digested. Bears typically overturn rocks and stumps in search of larval insects, termites or ants, and may invade yellow-jacket nests. In late August, bears begin to forage on the foods that enable them to gain weight rapidly so that they can go through the denning period without eating. They eat a great deal of acorns, pinon nuts and juniper berries in the fall to store fat for the approaching winter. If necessary, they will feed on small rodents, maggots and anthills. True to popular belief, bears do sometimes raid commercial beehives to feed on the honey and larval stages of bees. An occasional bear will also kill livestock. Males may eat and kill cubs. Such behavior may not fit our image of Pooh or Smokey, but it does maintain a balance between population and available habitat and allow big, dominant males to sire their own cubs more often.



## SHELTER

We have all seen cartoon bears entering caves to begin their long winter sleep, but real black bears do not fit this stereotype. Black bears select a surprisingly small den, which has one or more openings. The openings are often so narrow that an adult human would find it difficult to squeeze through them. In New Mexico, dens are frequently located under outcroppings of large rocks or tree roots. It is believed that small dens are chosen for their ability to conserve heat. Pregnant females den the longest; males generally the shortest. There is a lot of overlap in the times when males and females enter and emerge from the dens. Young independent females and males den alone and may emerge as early as late March, depending on the weather.

Black bears are not true hibernators but enter a state of 'torpor', which is a modified form of hibernation. Though drowsy and slow to react, a mother bear can still defend herself and her cubs more effectively than can an animal that truly hibernates. The black bear's metabolic and digestive processes undergo an amazing transformation during its stay in the den. Rather than excreting, the black bear has evolved the capacity to reabsorb its waste products and convert them into useful proteins, water and other nutrients. Since urination and defecation don't occur, there is no odor in the den. This significantly decreases the bear's chances of being found by mountain lions, bobcats or coyotes, which may prey upon bears, especially cubs, in the dens.



By late fall, if they have access to lots of food, especially mast crops of oak acorns, pinon nuts and berries, cubs can tip the scales at 40-70 pounds! Cubs are weaned at about seven months but remain with their mother until late into their second spring. Climbing is one of the first and most important skills the cubs learn. Mothers frequently send their cubs up trees to insure their safety.



## RANGE

You can find black bears in all forested areas in New Mexico (14.6 million acres)- and sometimes wandering far afield from their typical mountain habitat! Females usually maintain a home range of five to seven square miles.

Males on an average occupy an area of 25 square miles, although they can extend their territories to as much as 50 square miles if habitat quality deteriorates. Under ordinary conditions black bears tend to avoid each other rather than engaging in territorial



aggression. A sub-adult female's territory will overlap that of her mother's range. Sub-adult males sometimes disperse greater distances, which helps maintain the gene pool by reducing inbreeding. When habitat becomes limited or degraded, sub-adults may be forced into marginal areas near human populations. This 'movement' of bears has happened several times to communities near bear habitat. During drought conditions, as many as 25 sub-adult bears have wandered into Albuquerque and surrounding communities in late summer and fall in search of food.

## BLACK MARKET

Amid the clamor and bustle of an urban Asian market place, on a street lined with elegant shops, is an unadorned but conspicuous booth. Surrounded by a crowd, a vendor hawks an inventory of live mammals and reptiles, rhino horn, elk antlers and the gall bladders and paws of bears. The vendor is a link in the international wildlife trade, the profits of which rival those of the illicit drug trade. Asian medical lore holds that particular animal parts possess healing properties. Medicinal use of these animal parts has caused the decimation of local and regional animal species. These parts are destined for Asia as well as to Asian markets in the U.S. and Canada. Many individuals will pay exorbitant prices for the opportunity to eat bear paw soup, which is considered to be an aphrodisiac. Gall bladders, which are used to treat a variety of ailments, fetch \$2,000 to \$3,000 a piece.

To meet the market demand, vendors have begun to draw upon wildlife populations all over the world. All Asian bear species are now listed as endangered and international trade in their parts is banned. So, suppliers of bear parts have turned increasingly to the American black bear. New Mexico law prohibits the sale or barter of the internal organs of bears but 15 other states allow some sale of bear parts. Without a national prohibition on trade in bear internal organs, an interstate and international illicit trade flourishes.

## BEAR MANAGEMENT

Game protection laws for many big game mammals were first passed in New Mexico in 1895. Black bears have been protected as a big game mammal with controlled hunting regulations since 1927. Since that time, bear habitats across the state have continued to be developed for many other uses. Fragmentation and loss of habitat is of concern for the long term maintenance of healthy bear populations. Bears that are connected to each other across the landscape allows populations to maintain a healthy genetic diversity.

During an average year the Department sells 5,000 permits to hunt bears in the state, with 250-300 bears being harvested.

It is essential for wildlife agencies to maintain an accurate database of bear populations to help balance hunting and other forms of bear-related recreation (such as chasing bears with dogs) with competing interests for bears and bear habitat. To help find this balance, the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish conducted an 8 year research project on black bear populations in a hunted and non-hunted study site in the northern and southern parts of the state. Many important findings from that study have helped the Department make better management decisions to ensure healthy bear populations into the future.



## BEAR SIGN

You can tell that a bear has been foraging in an area by observing overturned rocks and stumps, and torn apart decaying trees and logs. It is thought that bears may mark territory by chewing, scratching, and rubbing against trees and wooden signposts. Look for indentations from teeth or claws or remnants of fur on posts and trees. Bear 'trails' can be found in solitary bear habitats as well as in areas of high bear density. The trails are formed because black bears often step in their own tracks or in the tracks of bears that have proceeded it. The result is depressions in the foliage if the trail is used frequently. Tracks may appear in the soil as well. The most frequent indicator of bear activity is 'scat' or fecal material. Scat content varies from vegetative matter to acorns, berries, or flesh/hair remains



It is shocking but it is a fact- the majority of bear deaths, apart from sport hunting, are directly attributable to our own ignorance, carelessness, laziness or intentional irresponsibility with food.

As human populations continue to increase and we encroach further into bear country, we unwittingly create problems for bears and ourselves. Black bears have a natural fear of humans. They instinctively avoid us, but the scent of easily obtained food is irresistible to bears, especially during periods of food scarcity. A snack left inside a tent, unwashed dishes at a campsite, pet food on the porch, garbage in cans, or even a hummingbird feeder can entice a hungry bear. Normally, black bears do not attack people unless they are cornered or injured. However, contact with human food can radically alter bear behavior. Black bears have been known to invade tents and smash windshields and ice chests in search of an easy meal. The intentional baiting of bears with food by people who want to photograph them or see them up close is a dangerous, illegal act that often results in dire consequences. The sad truth is that if you introduce human food to a bear it will not be alive much longer. **If you feed a bear, you kill a bear.**

The scenario often unfolds like this: During a drought or summer months when food is scarce and plants are indigestible to bears, they often extend their range looking for food. Their keen sense of smell all too often leads them to human food. Just one meal can transform a magnificently adapted, independent wild creature into a human-food junkie! People complain, and conservation officers initially try to frighten the bear away with rubber bullets. If the bear is new to human food, this technique may work. Many other approaches have been tried as well such as using specially trained breed of dogs to scare bears away from where humans live. The most effective solution for individuals is to bring any potential food sources such as garbage, pet food, bird food etc. in at night into a secure location. Many communities are now investing in bear-

proof dumpsters and garbage containers and are experiencing positive results.

### Can't you transplant a "problem" bear?

Yes — and no. Most "problem" bears are young bears, on their own in the world for the first time. They don't yet have their own territory (or they wouldn't be wandering, hungry, into a campground). If a yearling bear tries to move in on another bear's territory, it's immediately chased away or killed by the resident bear.

Our problem, as humans, is trying to find a place to "take" a problem bear. You can't take it back to where it was; it has no territory there, and other bears would kill or drive it away. You can't drive 200 miles to another forest and just "dump" the bear; the resident bears there will probably kill it. A relocated bear will travel vast distances to find its way "home." And once home, the bear will still not have a territory, will resume its nuisance behavior at campgrounds, may get into trouble with humans, and face the last and least desirable alternative — being destroyed.

### "Couldn't you take it to a zoo or something?"

People erroneously assume that, if relocating a bear doesn't help, it can just be taken to a zoo. But most zoos do not need bears; they are already overloaded with homeless bears and have neither the resources nor the funds to take on any more. When bear territories are shrinking and food is scarce, there simply is no place for a bear to go.

Remember, when bears start eating human food it becomes their food of choice and they teach their cubs about it. Bears can quickly lose their natural fear of humans and can become very aggressive in their search for food.





# How to Keep Bears and People Safe

## CAMPING ETIQUETTE

1. Keep your campsite clean, day and night. Wash dishes as soon as possible. Strain food particles from dishwater and pack them out with your garbage.
2. Put trash and food in bear-proof containers (such as your vehicle or bear cannisters) or hang it in a bag with a rope between two trees or from a high tree branch.
3. Set up your tent 100 yards from cooking areas, if at all possible.
4. Pack it out! Do not ever bury or burn your garbage. The next group of campers may encounter the bears your trash attracted.
5. Do NOT keep food in your tent (including gum, mint toothpaste, shampoo, baby wipes, which may smell like food to bears).
6. Change your clothes after you have cooked. Yes!- Then put the cooking-odor clothes in a bear-proof container or location.
7. If you take pets or horses, put pet or horse food away (in airtight containers) after the animal has been fed. Keep pets tethered.



## RURAL LIVING

1. Garbage – Store it in closed, sturdy cans kept inside a sturdy metal shed or garage. Do not put out garbage the night before a scheduled pickup. Periodically, clean cans with hot water and bleach.
2. Pet food – Feed pets indoors. Store food in sturdy metal cans inside a secure shed or garage. Make sure your garage door is closed at night.
3. Bird feeders – Set out only enough bird seed to last through the day. Bring in bird seed, suet, and hummingbird feeders at night. Hang them from wires between trees instead of on your deck or porch.
4. Clean your barbecue grill after each use. Store them in a closed, secure shed or garage.
5. Compost piles – Do not put fruit, melon rinds and other tasty items in mulch or compost piles except in winter. Keep them away from the house.
6. Fruit trees – Plant fruit trees away from your house. Pick and remove fruit from trees as it ripens and clean up fallen fruit.
7. Surround beehives, chickens, rabbits etc. with a 5-strand electric fence. Livestock should be kept away from the house.

## IF YOU SEE A BEAR

1. Stay calm. Do NOT run. Chances are the bear is just afraid of you as you might be of it. Move children and pets indoors or to a vehicle.
2. If the bear has not seen you, calmly move away and leave the area. As you move away, talk to the bear to let it discover your presence. A surprised bear is a dangerous bear.
3. Do NOT approach the bear, back away slowly while facing the bear. Do NOT make any sudden movements.
4. Look for cubs. Do not come between a mother and her cubs.
5. Bears often run from humans, but if it feels cornered or threatened, it could attack.
6. Fight back aggressively if a bear attacks you. Black bear attacks have been driven away when people have fought back with rocks, sticks, binoculars etc. Spraying cayenne pepper at close range at the face of an attacking bear can stop an attack.

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New Mexico Department of Game and Fish

1 Wildlife Way

Santa Fe, NM 87507

(505) 476-8000

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