

Welcome to the

Black Bear Habitat



Black Bear Classification

Class: Mammalia

Order: Carnivora

Family: Ursidae

Genus: *Ursus*

Species: *americanus*

Subspecies (Southern U.S): *floridanus*



Who Are Black Bears?

The black bear is the most common species of bear found in North America and the only one found in Florida. The black bear population outnumbers that of all other species of bears combined. The black bear is smaller and less aggressive than the brown bear and the polar bear that also inhabit North America.

American black bears are mammals in the Carnivora order that belong to the Ursidae family, the family of all bears. There are five total genera of bears and the black bear shares the *Ursus* genus with the brown bear, the polar bear, and the Asiatic bear. American black bears are classified as the *Ursus americanus* species. There are 16 subspecies within this species, with the *Ursus americanus floridanus* being the one that exists in Florida.

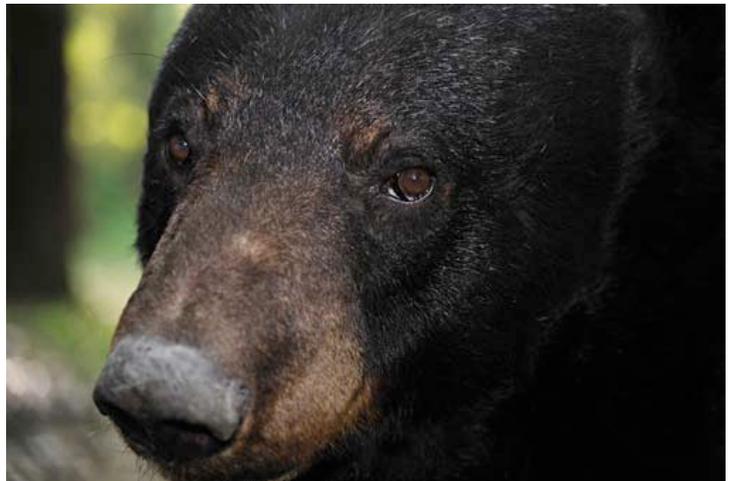
What Do They Look Like?

The American black bear is built for strength, with its large body and four powerful legs. It has a round head with a straight profile, small eyes, and two large, rounded ears. The black bear also has a short tail that is between three and six inches in length. The coat of an American black bear consists of two layers: a soft, dense undercoat and a thick, coarse outer layer. Many people have the misconception that all black bears are black, but these animals can actually be brown, cinnamon, blonde, and even white. This variety of colors is more commonly observed on bears in the western United States, while almost all black bears in the east are black. The black bear tends to have lighter colored fur around its muzzle and

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may have a blonde or white patch of fur on its chest.

There is a high variance in the weight of black bears, which can range anywhere from 100 to 600 pounds. This is because there are many factors that affect a bear's weight including age, gender, season of the year, availability of food, and genetics. Generally, females weigh 175 pounds and males weigh between 250 and 300 pounds. American black bears usually measure up to three feet at the shoulder when standing on all fours, and between five and six feet when standing upright on their hind legs. A black bear is usually between fifty and eighty inches in length, from nose to tail.



What Are Their Senses Like?

The *U. americanus* has 42 teeth; including four canines, twelve incisors, sixteen premolars, and ten molars. The black bear has colored vision, it can see in the dark, and it has good depth perception. Black bears are nearsighted, which serves as an advantage when it comes to finding food, but is a limitation when it comes to distinguishing objects that are farther away. These animals can hear noises from far distances and can hear a much higher range of frequencies than humans.

A bear's strongest sense is its sense of smell. The nasal mucosa area of an American black bear is about 100 times larger than that of a human, giving it a stronger sense of smell than even a bloodhound. It uses this keen sense of smell to find food, detect danger, and communicate with other bears. Black bears are good swimmers and moderately fast runners, reaching up to 30 miles per hour when they sprint. A black bear will exercise its excellent ability of climbing trees to escape potential danger when it is scared.



What Kind of Tracks Do They Make?

Black bears have the ability to stand on their hind legs but they usually walk plantigrade, or flat-footed, on all fours. They are curious creatures, though, and will stand on their hind legs when necessary in order to explore or access food. Each of a black bear's four feet has five toes with five long, sharp claws. The claws are often visible in black bear tracks, where the front claws appear longer than the back claws. These prints indicate that the black bear's elongated back feet are significantly larger than their stocky front

feet. The length of the front tracks is usually between 3.75 and eight inches, while the width of the front tracks is usually between 3.25 and six inches. The length of the back tracks is generally

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between 5.25 and 8 inches, while the width of the back tracks is between 3.5 to 6 inches wide. In the front track, the heel pad sometimes appears as a separate circle, whereas it is fused together with the metacarpal pad in the back track.

What Is Their Place in Nature?

American black bears are animals that consume both plants and other animals, also known as omnivores. They are important to nature because they help control the populations of insects and they also disperse the seeds of the plants they eat. Sometimes black bear cubs become prey to other animals, but the biggest threat to this species is mankind.



What Do They Eat?

Although they are classified as omnivores, black bears are mostly vegetarian and only a small part of their diet consists of animal matter. Since they are not very active predators, American black bears prefer to feed on carrion, the carcasses of dead animals.

Bears in this species receive most of their protein from insects and larvae, such as ants, termites, beetles, and bees. However, they will catch fish, squirrels, chipmunks, salamanders and other small animals to eat when they are able to do so with ease. Meanwhile, the majority of a bear's diet is made up of plants, such as grasses, nuts, berries, acorns, fruit, and roots. Even though black bears consume a great deal of carbohydrates, they prefer high protein and fat, which is why they often resort to digging in trash cans and stealing human food from campsites. Bears eat more in the summer and fall time to prepare for hibernation; they eat less in the springtime, when food is more scarce. Bears are driven by food, and will travel miles to find the source of food recognized by their keen sense of smell.



What Dangers Do They Face?

Humans pose the biggest threat to American black bears and are responsible for the majority of their deaths each year. Most of the time, bears cross humans in their search for something to eat, as they are attracted to the smells of human food and garbage. When a black bear enters civilization to seek food, it becomes vulnerable to being hit and killed by an automobile. If the animal happens to be successful in acquiring food left by humans, danger arises for both bear and the people.

The people are in danger because if the bear feels threatened by them, it may become aggressive. The bear is in danger because if it becomes aggressive and harms people, it may be euthanized. Also, the bear may become reliant on the

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leftover food and have a harder time surviving in the wild when the food source disappears.



Another way humans harm black bears is through deforestation because tearing down forests involves the destruction of their homes. Hunters and trappers sometimes target the American black bear, which is the final way that humans jeopardize this animal. Black bears have been hunted for their trophy value, for meat and fat, and for their coat, which has been used for clothes or rugs. There are now more regulations that limit the hunting of black bears and the selling of their hide, but they are still subject to regulated hunting. Besides humans, there are no

predators for an adult black bear, but black bear cubs are sometimes hunted by wolves and bobcats.

Are Black Bears Threatened?

Back in the 1970s, the population of black bears in Florida dwindled to a mere 300 bears, earning them a spot on Florida's threatened species list. However, with efforts made by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, the number of these animals has currently increased to about 3,000 bears. This ten percent increase has led the FWC to consider taking the *Ursus americanus floridanus* off of the threatened list. On a larger scale, the whole species of American black bears is on the Least Concern list of the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN). Black bears have a population that outnumbers all other species of bears combined. It has been determined that over the past two decades, the numbers of American black bears have risen significantly. The IUCN estimates that the population of the *U. americanus* is somewhere between 850,000 and 950,000 bears. Similar to the case in Florida, there are some areas where the population of black bears is threatened, but all together, American black bears have a stable population.



Where Do Black Bears Live?

American black bears are native to North America and can be found throughout the United States, Canada, and northern Mexico. While they are only found in eight states of northern Mexico, black bears presently occupy 41 of the 50 U.S. states and reside in all provinces and territories of Canada, with the exception of Prince Edward Island. The *Ursus americanus floridanus*, which is the subspecies that exists in Florida, also resides in Alabama and southern Georgia.

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What Is Their Habitat in the Wild Like?

Black bears require an adequate amount of cover, due to their shy and solitary nature, so they mainly live in heavily forested areas. However, they are able to adapt well to diverse habitats such as mountains, swampy areas, abandoned fields, hardwood forest, softwood forest, mixed forest, mountain laurel thickets, logged areas, and cornfields. Bears that live in closer proximity to urban areas usually weigh more due to the availability of high calorie foods, are more likely to get pregnant at a younger age, and are at a higher risk of dying a violent death.



Where Do They Live?

A home range is the region that an animal inhabits, which contains a supply of food, a source of water, and shelter. Male black bears roam across large distances, usually living within a home range of about sixty square miles. On the other hand, females usually only live within a range of about fifteen square miles. Males do not share home ranges, but there may be several females living within the home range of one male. Females tend to be more territorial than males and defend their land when approached

by a trespasser. Black bears mark their territory through urinating, defecating, and by scratching, rubbing, and biting trees. Although bears are commonly thought to sleep in caves, they actually make their dens in a variety of places, often lining their nest with grasses, leaves, and twigs. These dens may exist in open nests, brush piles, fallen trees, rock piles, excavations, hollow trees, and human structures.

How Do Black Bear Families Live?

Black bears are solitary animals that usually limit their interactions with one another to when they are mating and when females are taking care of their young. However, if they come across a prevalent food source, black bears become more tolerant of one another and live in a hierarchical system. Male black bears can also be referred to as boars, females are called sows, and the babies are known as cubs. They are typically shy, quiet animals that only show aggression when they are provoked.

To communicate, black bears use sounds, body language, touch, and scent-marking. Some of the noises bears make are grunts, woofs, roars, moans, tongue clicks, a motor-like hum, yelps, or cries. Scent-marking allows the bears to identify one another, claim their territory, and attract potential mates.



What Is Their Life Cycle?

American black bears are polygamous, which means they have several mates throughout their lifetime. Females usually breed once every two years and males mate with many females as they can each year. The breeding season for this species takes place in June and July. Females carry a litter of one to five cubs for about 225 days before giving birth in January or February. Although the gestation period lasts for 225 days, the development of the embryos is delayed and does not take place until the last six to eight weeks of pregnancy. When the cubs are born, they are blind and naked and usually weigh less than a pound. They stay in the den and nurse as their mother continues to hibernate. As she sleeps, she nurses them and keeps them warm with her large body, arms, and legs. If the cubs cry, the sow will wake from her deep sleep to tend to her babies' needs. After about two months, they leave the den for the first time with their mother and they are weaned after about six to eight months.



The female is the only parent involved in the cubs' lives, providing food and protection and teaching necessary survival skills. When faced with a threat, females become extremely protective of their young. A mother black bear is likely to send her babies to safety and will exhibit aggressive behavior to the intruder. In contrast, the male does not directly contribute to the raising of the young bears. He only helps indirectly by warding off other bears from the area, which limits the competition the cubs must face and allows them a larger share of food. Cubs become independent at about 17 months old, when the mother forces them away so she can mate again. Both male and female black bears become sexually mature some time between two and five years of age. Most American black bears live to be around ten years old in the wild, but they can live up to 30 years if there is an ample food supply and little competition.

How Do Black Bears Spend Their Time?

American black bears are crepuscular animals, meaning they are most active at dusk and dawn. Depending on the area and the availability of food, black bears may become either diurnal or nocturnal. For example, if a bear lives near humans and has access to their garbage only during the daytime, it will seek food during the day and sleep at night, and vice versa. In the time that they are not roaming around or searching for food, black bears sleep in a bed that they make in the forest. Black bears spend even more time looking for food in the summer and fall to prepare for hibernation in the winter. Technically, bears enter a state known as torpor, which is where they sleep through the winter but have the capability of waking up if disturbed. When an animal is a true hibernator, nothing will wake it from its sleep. When winter comes, they choose a den that serves as their protective place to sleep. Pregnant females are very particular when it comes to selecting a den because the cubs will be born while she is hibernating. She will wake up to give birth and then will return back to her state of torpor. Bears lose a large amount of their body fat during the winter, since they are inactive and usually do not eat. Males will sometimes find food to eat if they wake up, but pregnant females remain in their den for the entire winter. When the cold months of winter are over, the period of torpor ends and the bears begin their search for food once again. There is less food in the spring, but throughout the year, they eat as much as they can to fatten up and prepare for the following winter.

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