

American Black Bear

(*Ursus americanus*)



Black bears are the most abundant and widely distributed of the three species of bears in America. Originally ranging in forested areas throughout North America, black bears are now found primarily in the less settled, forested regions in twenty-three states, Canada and Mexico.

Black bears are members of the family Ursidae, which also includes grizzly or brown bears and polar bears in North America. Black bears are secretive animals and prefer to live within the dense cover of forests and woodlands. Long-range survival of bears in Utah is closely dependent on preservation of critical habitat and wild areas.

General Description

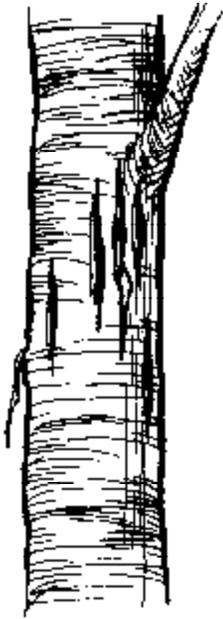
The black bear is the smallest of the North American bears. Adult bears stand about 28 to 32 inches at the shoulders and measure about 60 inches from nose to tail. The tail is about 4 inches long. Males are usually larger than females of the same age. An average adult male in summer weighs 180 to 350 pounds. In the fall when bears are building a thick layer of fat for the winter, they may be 20% to 30% heavier than in the summer. Bears will weigh considerably less when they emerge from their dens.

In Utah, black bears may vary in color from black to light brown (cinnamon) or reddish blond. Regardless of body color, all black bears will have a light brown muzzle. Black bears have a straight facial profile, long straight noses and large ears. Their claws curve sharply and are approximately one and a half inches long. For purpose of comparison, grizzly bears have a concave profile, claws that are approximately four inches long and small ears.

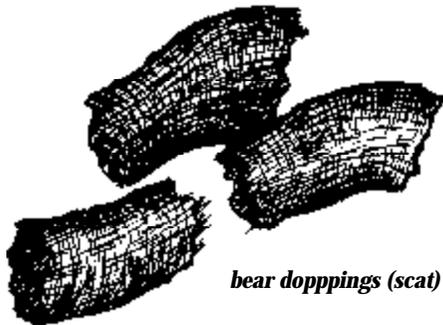
Bears are plantigrade, walking with the entire lower surface of the foot on the ground (like humans). Bears have 5 toes, each with curved, nonretractable claws. They walk in a shuffling, flat-footed manner. They also are extremely agile for their size and sometimes stand erect on their hind feet to see and smell better. Their short but powerful legs enable black bears to run up to 30 miles per hour for short distances. They can climb easily and swim well.

Utah is black bear country. The last Utah grizzly bear, known as "Old Ephraim," was killed in 1923 near Logan in northern Utah.

Signs of the Black Bear



tree clawed by a black bear



bear droppings (scat)



black bear tracks (walking gait)

Food Habits

Black bears are omnivores and opportunistic, feeding largely on vegetation. Seventy to 80% of the black bear's diet consists of available roots, tubers, bulbs, berries (especially elderberries and snowberries), succulent leaves of hardwoods, grasses and nuts such as acorns. As much as 20% of their diet may consist of amphibians, reptiles, small mammals, fish, ants and other insects. Utah's black bears feed extensively on carpenter ants in downed timber and the larvae in ant hills. Another 10% of the bear's diet may be carrion (flesh from dead animals). Bears, for example, will readily eat meat from winter-killed animals. Bears are active at night, feeding generally at dawn and dusk; although sometimes black bears will feed and travel by day.

Habitat

In Utah, black bears inhabit wild areas of Gambel oaks, conifers and moist creek bottoms. They often graze along the edges of green meadows. They also select habitat with appropriate sites for dens, including areas with caves or areas in which dens can be dug out from under the roots of large trees or piles of large rocks. These dens are usually located on north- and east-facing slopes in areas dense with Gambel oaks or conifers. Generally, black bears tend to avoid large open areas.

Reproduction

Bears mate from early June to mid-July. Male bears will typically mate with more than one female. Although mating occurs during the summer, "delayed implantation" occurs in bears. This delay prevents the fertilized egg from implanting on the uterine wall and developing until late November or early December. This implantation coincides with the bears entering their winter dens. With a gestation period of about seven months, cubs are born in January or February in the den and nurse from their mother while she remains in her deep sleep. Black bears can have as many as four cubs but generally give birth to two.

Newborns are covered with fine dark hair, weigh six to twelve ounces and are six to nine inches long. Their eyes and ears are closed. When they emerge from the den, they weigh about eight pounds. Cubs usually remain with their mother during that first summer and through the first winter, denning with her. The family group will disband the following summer. At this time the female is ready to breed again, therefore generally raising only one litter every two years. Most females breed for the first time when they are three and a half to five and a half years old.

Apart from females with cubs or during the mating season, black bears usually are solitary. Males do not help rear the young.

Denning

Well-known for their winter denning behavior, black bears in Utah typically enter their dens in November after most food items become hard to find. Bears will spend the next 6 months in a dormant state which is technically not hibernation but is called a deep sleep or torpor. Their temperature drops only 8 to 10 degrees, and their metabolism and heart rate are only slightly reduced. Occasionally, for brief periods, bears may emerge from their dens during the winter months. During the time spent in the dens, bears are nourished and kept warm by the thick layer of fat which they have built up during the fall. They are able to survive the winter without eating or drinking and without eliminating any waste. Bears emerge from their dens in March or April. Lone bears emerge before females that have cubs.



Management

The Utah Wildlife Code has included the black bear as a protected wildlife species since 1967. Prior to this, hunting of bears occurred without restriction throughout the state. Seasons for hunting bears were first established in 1969, and since then bear hunting has been regulated by the Utah Wildlife Board.

Currently, Utah is divided into 40 management units, and a limited number of bear permits are issued for 25 of those units. This statewide limited-entry permit system provides for a specified number of permits to be issued for each unit based on recommendations from both the Division of Wildlife Resources biologists and the public.

In making recommendations for the number of bears to be hunted, biologists consider several factors. These factors include habitat quality (with emphasis on availability of spring forage and abundance of preferred foods in the fall, especially acorns and chokecherries), population information, human impacts on available habitat, depredation occurrences and hunting history. After considering all recommendations, the Wildlife Board establishes the hunting regulations.

In order to better understand Utah's bear population, biologists have studied the activities of selected bears by using radio collars. Tracking bears with radio collars has provided data about habitat preference, seasonal use of

habitat, preferred foods, travel corridors, den locations, denning periods, movement patterns and age of the population. Tracking bears to den sites in the winter allows biologists to check reproduction rates, sex ratio of cubs, mortality, survival and health of individual bears.

To hunt bears, hunters must first purchase a small game or combination license and apply for and subsequently draw a limited-entry hunting permit. License fee revenues help support management activities necessary to assure the long-term viability of Utah's bear population. For more information on hunting bears, contact the Division of Wildlife Resources Information Services at (801) 538-4700.

The Utah Division of Wildlife Resources and Animal Damage Control, under the United States Department of Agriculture, investigate occurrences where bears are suspected of killing livestock. All cases of depredation must be confirmed as bear-caused before trained personnel from Animal Damage Control are authorized by Wildlife Resources to take the bear.

For more information about Utah's black bears, contact the Wildlife Section, Utah Division of Wildlife Resources, 1594 West North Temple, Suite 2110, Salt Lake City, UT 84116. (801) 538-4758.



Safety in Black Bear Country

Most forested areas in Utah provide habitat suitable for black bears and probably contain a resident population of bears. Because bears are solitary and secretive, they usually avoid humans but are attracted to odors such as those from human food, pet food, garbage, hummingbird feeders, toothpaste, suntan lotion and insect repellent. For your safety, the following guidelines should be followed when you're in black bear country.

To Prevent Conflicts with Bears:

Generally, a clean (food-free) area is a bear-free area. In spring and summer, bears are constantly roaming and searching for food. If they find none, they move on.

- Keep rural home and cabin sites food- and litter-free. Food attracts bears and encourages them to remain. Remove all garbage from the area; clean and store barbecue stoves inside a secure facility. If garbage is stored on the premises, keep it in a covered, bear-proof container and remove it often.
- Do not leave food in coolers, out on picnic tables or where bears have easy access to it.
- **NEVER** feed a bear to take pictures of it or to get closer to it.
- When camping, store food where it cannot be reached by bears. NEVER keep food in your tent. Store food in the trunk of your car whenever possible.
- If hiking in dense vegetation, such as that found along stream banks, make noise to alert bears of your presence. Voices, whistles, bells, and other noises are usually sufficient to make bears aware of you.
- Never approach or come between a mother bear and her young. A mother bear may be extremely aggressive when she is with her cubs.



If You Encounter a Bear:

- Do not make direct eye contact. Bears perceive eye contact as aggressive behavior.
- Make noise, yell, clap your hands, bang pots, or throw rocks to scare it away.
- **NEVER** approach a bear or let it approach you. If it does approach you, retreat **slowly** or climb a tree until it leaves.
- If you are attacked and cannot get away, fight back, kick, scream and yell! Be aggressive.
- *All bears should be considered potentially dangerous and should be treated with caution and respect. If you observe unusual or threatening behavior by a bear, please notify your nearest Division of Wildlife Resources office.*

Incidents of black bears attacking humans are rare but can occur.

Most bears will retreat hastily if a person approaches, but bears can be unpredictable. They're very powerful animals and may protect a food supply or cache from all intruders, including humans.

When bears feel threatened, they normally snort and move away. When demonstrating aggressive behavior, they may snap or pop their jaws, move their head back and forth in a swaying motion and flatten out their lips.

Remember that bears are wild animals and should be treated with caution.

Wildlife Notebook Series No. 1 written and edited by Jordan Pederson, Regional Supervisor, Central Region, and Brenda Schussman; signs of the black bear illustrated by Jill Rensel; and drawings by Clark Bronson. (IMAGES MAY NOT BE REPRODUCED)

The Utah Department of Natural Resources receives federal aid and prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, sex, national origin, or disability. For more information or complaints regarding discrimination, contact Executive Director, Utah Department of Natural Resources, P.O. Box 145610, Salt Lake City, UT 84116-5610 or Office of Equal Opportunity, U.S. Department of Interior, Washington, D.C. 20240. The Division of Wildlife Resources is funded by the sale of hunting and fishing licenses and through federal aid made possible by an excise tax on the sale of firearms and other hunting and fishing-related equipment.

