



American Black Bears



Black bears were likely common in the forests of southern New England at the time when the first European traders and settlers arrived. During the ensuing period of colonization, most of the land was cleared for agriculture by early settlers, directly reducing habitat for bears and other native wildlife. Bears and other large mammals were hunted for food and fur without regulation and persecuted because of damage caused to livestock and crops. Bears most likely disappeared from Rhode Island prior to 1800.

With the advent of modern wildlife management practices and philosophies in the early 1900's bears and many other species of wildlife were afforded protections under federal and state laws. Additionally, as many farms in the northeast were abandoned, regeneration of forests created suitable habitat for bears. Black bear populations have been slowly increasing throughout southern New England in recent decades. As bear populations increase in neighboring states the sight of a black bear in Rhode Island will become an increasingly common occurrence.

Description:

The American black bear (*Ursus americanus*) is the smallest of the three bear species found in North America. Black bears can be long-lived and are intelligent, adaptable animals. Black bears are stocky, large bodied animals with relatively short legs. They can grow to about six feet in length. Adult male bears (boars) are larger than adult females, typically weighing between 150 and 450 pounds while females (sows) generally weigh between 100 and 250 pounds. Bears that have access to unlimited food supplies can achieve greater weights. As their name would suggest black bears have black fur, often appearing glossy black. Their muzzle is tan. In some parts of North America black bears may be more brownish in appearance than black. They have a short tail and sometimes a white patch on the chest. Bears have five toes with non-retractable claws on all four feet that give them excellent tree-climbing abilities. Black bears have an exceptional sense of smell and excellent hearing. Their eyesight is somewhat less acute and they will often stand on their hind legs to get a better look at something.



Image Courtesy of
Maryland DNR

Life History:

Range and Habitat: The American black bear is found only in North America and is the only species of bear occurring in the eastern United States. Black bears prefer forested habitat, particularly older age stands that offer hard mast (i.e. acorns and other nuts) with associated wetlands, meadows, and other habitat types for foraging. They occur as far south as Florida and northern Mexico and as far north as forests grow in Alaska and Canada, from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Many populations in the east-central and southern United States occur only in the protected mountains and woodlands of parks and preserves. It is not known how many bears currently live in Rhode Island.



Most bears seen in recent years are transients, usually young males, from neighboring states. As bear populations increase in the region, Rhode Island will eventually (if not already) have a resident population.

Food Habits: Black bears are omnivores. They eat a wide variety of foods including grasses, herbs, fruits, and nuts. They will also feed on carrion (i.e. dead animals) and they will eat the larvae of many insects such as ants, beetles, bees, and termites. Black bears will opportunistically prey on small mammals or deer fawns but are not physically designed for chasing and capturing prey. The natural diet of black bears is typically high in carbohydrates but low in proteins and fats. They will actively seek out foods with high protein or fat content. They will eat birdseed, pet food, livestock feed and garbage. Bears feeding on a protein-rich food source show significant weight gains and increased birth rates.

Reproduction: Female black bears generally reach breeding age at three to four years old and with sufficient nutrition typically breed every two years. Males become sexually mature at the same age, but are not likely able to compete with older larger, dominant males for breeding opportunities.



Breeding season for black bears in our area occurs during June and July. During this time adult males may travel great distances in search of breeding age females. Dominant adult males may breed with more than one female. After breeding adult males go their separate way and do not participate in raising the young.

Female black bears have delayed implantation, a process whereby fertilization occurs immediately after mating, but the embryo does not fully develop until a later time.

Black bear cubs are born in January or February. At birth, cubs are blind and toothless and typically weigh between 6 oz. and 1 lb. They are active and will nurse while their mother rests in her den until spring. Litter size may vary from one to five but a litter of two or three cubs is most common. Cubs are weaned (i.e. move from milk to solid food diet) at about seven months old. They will stay with their mother for about a year and a half. During this time their mother offers them protection from predators and other dangers and shows them what foods to eat and where and when to find them. Young bears either leave or are driven away by their mother in the spring following their second winter with her in the den. She will then be receptive to breed again. Young male bears, away from their mother for the first time, often travel great distances looking for food, unoccupied territories and trying to avoid contact with older male bears. It is often these young males that venture into residential backyards looking for food. Young female bears typically do not travel very far from where they were born and tend to stay close to their mothers home range.

Home range size for black bears is variable and depends on the quality of habitat and other factors. Generally, adult males have larger home ranges than females. Regional studies have shown the home range of adult males may be from 12 to 60 square miles and sometimes larger. Female home ranges are smaller and those with cubs may use an area of only 5 to 7 square miles, or less. Aside from female bears with cubs, or during breeding season black bears lead solitary lives. Adult bears will defend their territories against other bears perceived as intruders but tend to avoid direct confrontations. Bears have a complex social structure and convey messages through scratching, biting, and rubbing trees and utility poles. These “signposts” reveal who is in the area and their social position, reproductive status, or other messages.

Hibernation:

Hibernation is a survival strategy used by many mammal species to cope with adverse environmental conditions such as cold temperatures or lack of available food resources. Black bears are not considered to be true hibernators. Their body temperature and respiration rate decreases during winter denning, but not to the extent of true hibernators such as woodchucks, bats, and ground squirrels. Black bears do not eat, drink, or defecate while they are in the winter den. They will wake if they are disturbed. In the southern parts of their range, they may not hibernate at all. Winter den sites may be in large hollow tree trunks, under tree stumps, brush piles, rock outcrops, or sometimes in or under man-made structures. The bears often line their winter dens with grass, leaves, or moss. In the northeast, winter denning usually takes place between November and March, with females with cubs spending longer periods in the den than males.



Threats:

Adult bears have few natural enemies. Many die from human-related causes (i.e. vehicle strikes, hunting). Habitat loss and human encroachment into bear habitat are ongoing

problems for bears and many wildlife species. Poaching to supply bear parts to foreign markets is also an ongoing problem in some areas. Very few black bears die of disease.

Black bears are protected in Rhode Island and cannot be hunted or taken by any method.

Living with bears:

At one time, it was thought that black bears required large areas of forest with little human disturbance to survive. Bears have proven to be much more tolerant of human activity than previously believed. We now know that bears can not only survive but can actually thrive in close proximity to people.

Bear population growth and range expansion in southern New England is expected to continue. Rhode Island residents can expect to see more bears in coming years, particularly young male bears searching for territories not already occupied by other bears. Bears are shy and will usually avoid interactions with people. Food resources near homes will attract bears into backyards and residential areas and condition bears to associate food with human activity. Bird feeders, pet food, unsecured trash, livestock feed, compost piles, fruit trees, and bee hives are all potential food for bears. Taking simple actions and precautions can prevent or reduce conflicts and damage and reduce problem behavior by bears. Not everyone in Rhode Island can expect to see a bear in their yard or neighborhood but those who live in the more rural parts of Providence, Kent, and Washington Counties should be aware of the possibility.

To avoid problems with bears:

- Wait until November 1st to start feeding birds and try to remove feeders by late March. If a bear does visit your feeder, remove it, at least temporarily. Place feeders in locations or high enough off the ground so that they cannot be reached by bears. Bears have excellent memories and they will remember where the easy to reach feeders are.
- Secure trash in containers or buildings that cannot be accessed by bears. Wait until the morning of trash collection before putting trash at the curb. Dumpsters should be locked to prevent bears from entering.
- Avoid feeding pets out of doors. If you do, do not leave food dishes out overnight.
- Secure livestock feeds in secure airtight containers or buildings. Certain feed types, especially "sweet feeds" can be particularly attractive to bears.
- Do not place meat scraps or fatty items in compost piles.



- Secure your small livestock in pens or buildings that bears cannot access. Goats, pigs, and sheep are occasionally predated by bears. Horses and cows rarely so. Chickens and rabbits are easy targets unless fencing and hutches are secure. Use electric fencing to protect small livestock and reinforce wire fencing.
- Protect beehives with electric fencing. Avoid placing beehives close to the edge of woods. Hives and livestock pens directly adjacent to the tree line are more at risk than those in the open or closer to the house.
- **DO NOT INTENTIONALLY FEED BEARS.** It is not only illegal in Rhode Island, it is bad for the bears. Feeding bears will only cause problems for you, your neighbors, and ultimately the bear.



If you encounter a bear on your property or while in the woods, do not panic. Bears are rarely aggressive towards people. Given adequate warning and opportunity, bears will almost always flee from humans. It is possible that given the right wind conditions you might inadvertently come upon a bear without it being aware of your presence. If you find yourself in such a situation, walk away from the bear while continuing to face the bear. Do not run. Do not try to climb a tree. Bears are better climbers than you. Bears will sometimes “bluff” charge when they feel threatened, are scared, or feel cornered. If this happens it is probably best to just stand your ground and make a lot of noise.

If you see a bear in your yard either leave it alone or attempt to scare it away from within your house or from a safe distance. Often your presence at the door or window is enough. Remove whatever item may have attracted the bear (after the bear leaves).

In 2002, the DEM developed a policy for dealing with nuisance or problem black bears. The Department’s response will depend on the circumstances in each situation. The presence of a bear in a backyard will not necessarily require or justify its removal. Given the opportunity the bear will find its way out of an area. In most situations, removal of food attractants is enough to resolve the problem. The DEM will only attempt to relocate a bear under certain circumstances. Capture and removal will usually only be attempted if it is determined that a bear is unlikely or unable to leave an area on its own.

Immobilization of a bear or any wild animal is difficult even under the most ideal circumstances and a number of issues must be considered before it will be attempted. Bears will not be relocated to other states. Bears that demonstrate persistent negative behavior such as killing livestock, entering buildings, or aggressive behavior towards humans may be candidates for lethal removal.

Division of Fish and Wildlife
(401) 789-0281

Division of Law Enforcement
(401) 222-3070

FOR QUESTIONS, INFORMATION, TO REPORT A SIGHTING, OR IN CASE OF AN EMERGENCY, PLEASE CONTACT THE DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT: DIVISION OF FISH AND WILDLIFE, OR THE DIVISION OF LAW ENFORCEMENT

