

Black Bears

Black bears are the smallest and most common of the three bear species found in North America, and the only species found in Pennsylvania. Their fur is generally uniform in color but is not necessarily black. The black color phase is most prevalent in the East, and brown phases from cinnamon to blond are prevalent in the West. Bears in the black color phase may have a small white patch on the chest. Adult males weigh between 350 and 500 pounds, and females weigh between 150 and 250 pounds. Occasionally, a male may weigh more than 600 pounds. Black bears are excellent tree climbers, and cubs learn to climb at a very young age.

General Biology

Black bears are very adaptable and live quite well in areas populated by humans. Prime bear habitat is characterized by contiguous forests that contain bogs, swamps, mountains, a well-established forest understory, and abundant mast (nuts and berries). For dens, bears use cavities in trees, holes in the ground, or simply nests of leaves and branches.

In Pennsylvania, bear habitat typically consists of mixed hardwood forests. Oak, hickory, black cherry, and beech trees provide the favorite mast of the black bear. An understory of blackberries and blueberries attracts bears; cornfields and abandoned apple orchards also are popular feeding sites.

Black bears are omnivorous and forage on a wide variety of plants and animals. Almost 75 percent of their diet consists of plant foods such as fruits, nuts, acorns, berries, seeds, and roots. This diet is supplemented by animal matter such as beetles, ants, and bees. Most vertebrates are eaten only as carrion. Bears also have shown a propensity for human garbage.

Black bears breed during the summer months. Bears are polygamous: the males mate with a number of females. Males often travel extensively in search of receptive females. After mating occurs, implantation of the fertilized egg is delayed, and the embryo does not develop in the female womb until the period of winter dormancy. Cubs are born in winter dens in late January and early February. Newborns are altricial (helpless, nearly hairless, with eyes closed). Cubs are weaned by late summer, but they usually remain with the female through

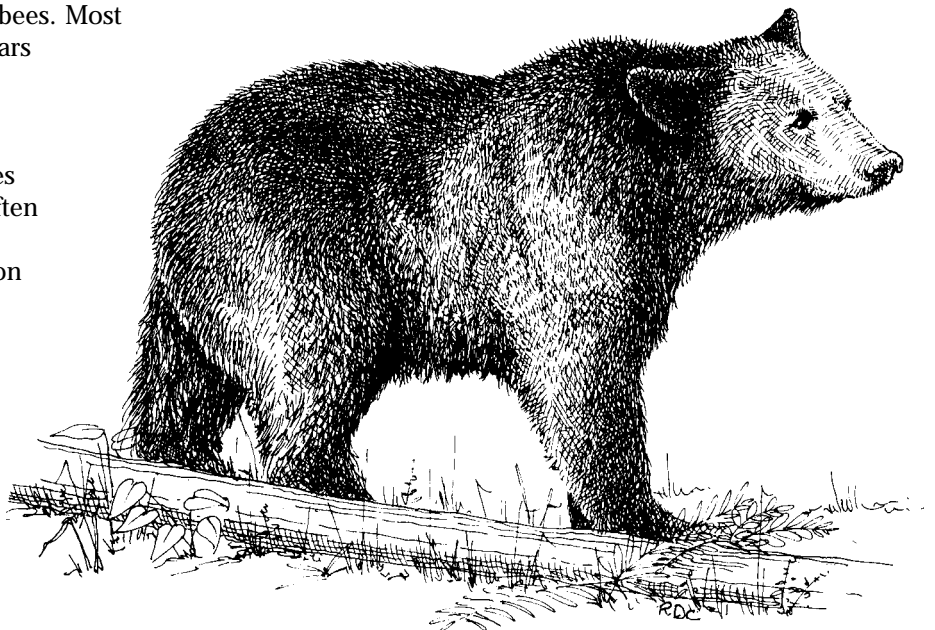
their first year. In Pennsylvania, female black bears often breed at 2½ years of age and have an average of 2.9 cubs per year. Three or four cubs are not uncommon.

Bears are primarily nocturnal animals, feeding and exercising at night and remaining relatively inactive during the day. However, it is not unusual to see bears during the day, and this should not be a reason for concern. Bears are not true hibernators but survive food shortages and cold weather through a period of winter dormancy, during which they may awaken and leave their dens in search of food.

Description of Damage

Areas in Pennsylvania that best support bears are the mountainous north central and northeastern counties. Bears are expanding into new areas, however, and can now be found in 50 of Pennsylvania's 67 counties. Bears have adapted well to encroaching human development and can be found even in suburban areas. Because of human movement into bear habitat and the bear's natural expansion of its range, bears and people are likely to come into contact with each other. Bears are attracted to human residences by bird feeders, garbage, and food left outside for domestic pets. In Pennsylvania, black bears may scavenge for food in dumpsters located at roadside rest areas, restaurants, campgrounds, and residential garbage cans.

Actual economic damage caused by bears affects mainly beehives and corn, but bears are strong enough to



tear open doors, rip holes in siding, break windows, and rip open tents to get food. Trees and crops also may suffer bear damage. True to the stereotype, a bear may destroy several beehives in an attempt to reach honey and bees. Bears may knock down rows of sweet corn while feeding. Bear damage to corn appears as a circular pattern of destruction in the cornfield. Damage to important crop trees is not a major problem in Pennsylvania, but because bears consume fruit, they may damage orchards. Bears occasionally climb beech trees to feed on beechnuts and leave telltale claw marks in the smooth bark.

Intentional feeding of bears can and has caused serious problems. Bears quickly associate the food with humans and lose their natural fear of people and pets. This change in the bear's natural behavior may eventually lead to its destruction once it becomes a "nuisance" bear. Bears are wild animals. People may be tempted to feed them in order to watch or photograph them, but doing so undoubtedly leads to problems and should not be done under any circumstances.

Legal Status

Black bears are protected by state laws under the jurisdiction of the Pennsylvania Game Commission. Hunters may take a black bear during the legal bear season each fall. Contact the Pennsylvania Game Commission for details regarding bear season. The commission also will have information regarding live trapping of bears and fencing plans.

Pennsylvania Game Commission

Region	Phone number
Northwest	1-877-877-0299
Southwest	1-877-877-7137
Northeast	1-877-877-9357
Southeast	1-877-877-9470
Northcentral	1-877-877-7671
Southcentral	1-877-877-9107

Damage Control

Because of the size and nature of black bears, damage control methods fall into two categories: methods homeowners can use and methods that must be left to professional wildlife conservation officers. Exclusion techniques and habitat modification can be used to reduce bear damage without involving the Pennsylvania Game Commission. However, only Pennsylvania Game Commission personnel have the authority to trap and remove a black bear.

Habitat modification

Bears, like most wildlife, use protective cover as travel lanes. Placing crops and beehives at considerable distances from timber and brush helps to reduce bear damage. To discourage bears from visiting homes, the first priority is to remove what is attracting them, usually

the food source. Bears will eat just about anything, and birdseed, garbage, pet foods, hummingbird feeders, and anything else that smells good could become a bear attractant.

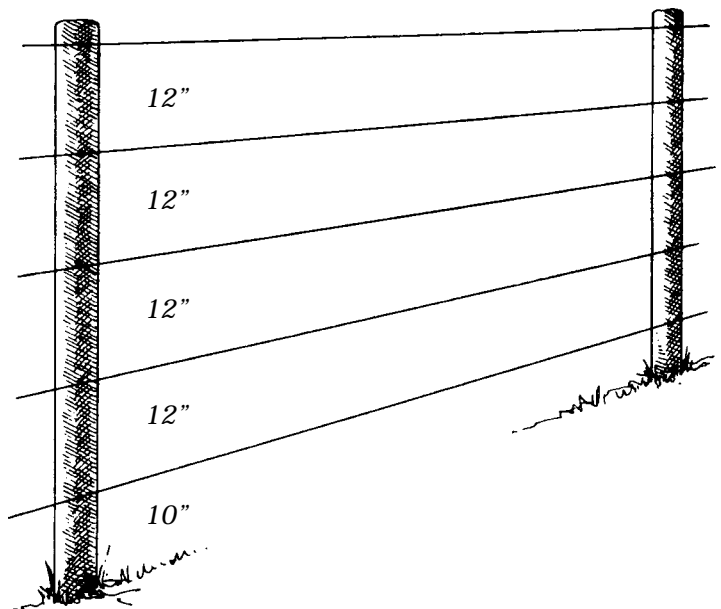
Homeowners have the responsibility of removing bear attractants from their property once bears begin visiting. Garbage cans should be secured in a garage or outbuilding and tightly sealed. Bird feeders and pet food should be removed from outside locations.

Exclusion

Electric fencing is the most effective way to prevent damage to beehives and other high-value properties. The bear's fur can insulate the animal from electric shock, so baiting the fence is usually required. Hanging strips of bacon or strips of aluminum foil smeared with peanut butter on the fence has proven effective. The bear then licks the bait and receives a shock. The Pennsylvania Game Commission has a program for supplying electric fences to people who qualify, in areas where bear damage is persistent. More information on fencing can be obtained by contacting the Pennsylvania Game Commission.

Trapping

Sometimes a bear becomes such a problem that the only solution is to remove the animal from the area. If a persistent bear problem occurs, a Game Commission officer may live trap the animal and move it to a new location. Trapping is attempted only after the homeowner has taken steps to eliminate the food source that is attracting the bear. Even when the bear is trapped and



The Penn State five-wire deer fence can be used to exclude bears.

relocated, however, there is a very high probability that it will return to the same general area, making live trapping ineffective. So-called "nuisance" bears have been known to return from as far away as 120 air miles after relocation. The solution isn't live trapping, but removing the food source that has attracted the bear to the home.

Materials and Suppliers

The following are suppliers of fencing products:

Wellscroft Farm Fence Systems
167 Sunset Hill
Harrisville, NH 03450
(603) 827-3464
fax: 6023-827-2999
<http://www.wellscroft.com>

Gallagher Power Fence, Inc.
P.O. Box 708900
San Antonio, TX 78270
(800) 531-5908
<http://www.gallagherusa.com>

West Virginia Fence Corp.
U.S. Rte. 219
Lindside, WV 24951
(800) 356-5458
Fax: (304) 753-4387
<http://www.maxflex.com>

Premier Fence Systems
Box 2031
300th St.
Washington, IA 52353
(800) 282-6631
<http://forages.orst.edu>

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This publication was prepared by:
Shannon T. Falker, assistant wildlife extension specialist,
and Margaret C. Brittingham, associate professor of
wildlife resources

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