

**H** eavy-set, formidable-looking animals, wild black bears are one of New York State's largest land mammals.

Though frequently thought of as aggressive and menacing, they are ordinarily very shy, elusive, secretive creatures. In fact, although common in most of the state, black bears try to avoid people and are rarely seen.

### DESCRIPTION

Native to North America, black bears (*Ursus americanus*) occur in Alaska, Canada, northern Mexico and most of the lower forty-eight states. They prefer wooded areas, occurring in and around mature forests. Black bears also do well in somewhat open and developed areas as long as adequate cover and an abundance of food are available. They are intelligent and curious and spend a great deal of time exploring for food. Solitary animals, they usually live alone, except for females with cubs and in feeding areas with an abundance of food. Adult bears have large home ranges, with males traveling up to 100 square miles, and females traveling 25 to 50 square miles.

In New York, black bears are second only to moose in size. Adult bears average 2½-3 feet tall at the shoulder and 6 feet long from their nose to the end of their short tail. Some individuals can reach weights of 600 pounds or more, but most adult bears are smaller, with males averaging 300 pounds and females averaging 160 pounds.

While black bears exhibit different color phases, most bears in New York are jet black, except for a light brown snout and an occasional white chest blaze. Once in a while, a brown or cinnamon colored black bear is spotted.

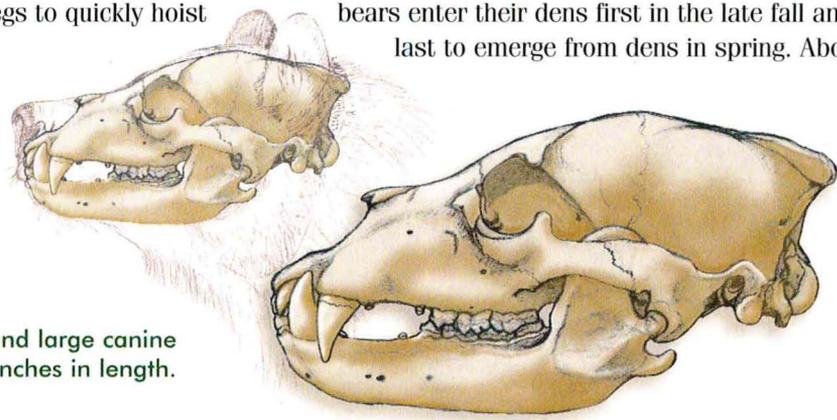
Black bears have adequate vision, better hearing, and an incredibly keen sense of smell, which is their primary sense. This acute sense of smell enables them to accurately locate food, occasionally from as far away as one mile. Their hindquarters are heavily muscled, enabling them to run up to 30 mph for short distances. They are excellent climbers, using their large claws and strong legs to quickly hoist themselves up trees, usually circling the trunk as they ascend. They are also excellent swimmers and do not hesitate to cross lakes or rivers. Long-lived, they can survive for 30 to 40 years.

### FOOD AND FAMILY LIFE

New York's largest carnivore, black bears are primarily vegetarians, eating an amazing amount of small items such as succulent plants (like skunk cabbage), grasses, sedges, clover, insects (especially ants and bees), berries, fruits, nuts, mast (acorns and beechnuts), and plant roots. However, bears are opportunists and will eat whatever is readily available, including amphibians, reptiles, small mammals, fish, carrion and garbage. In addition, they will also avail themselves of human foods (almost everything from barbecued chicken to freeze-dried meals and trail mix), bird seed (especially sunflower seeds), suet, pet food, agricultural crops (such as corn, oats or honey) and occasionally livestock.

During winter, when food is scarce, black bears find a den and basically sleep away the cold months. A den can be a crevice between or under boulders, a hollow tree or log, or under roots or a brushpile. Occasionally a bear may "den" unprotected on the forest floor with little or no shelter from the weather. Unlike a true hibernator, the denned black bear maintains a near normal body temperature which allows it to quickly react to any situation. True hibernators, such as woodchucks, are very slow to react during hibernation because they must first warm their bodies. During the four to six months that bears are in their dens, they will not eat, drink, urinate or defecate.

Denning is triggered by the length of daylight, the amount of the bear's body fat and the availability of food. Except for females and their cubs, bears den alone. Typically, female bears enter their dens first in the late fall and are the last to emerge from dens in spring. About half of all



Black bears have powerful jaws and large canine teeth that may exceed 1½ inches in length.

adult females will be pregnant during any given year. At the end of January or early February, females give birth to between one and six (average of two to three), half-pound, blind cubs. Females with cubs may not emerge from their dens until April or May, when the cubs will weigh around 10 pounds.

Adult female bears without cubs start breeding in late May or June. Breeding may occur in July, August, or possibly even September. Females breed for the first time between the ages of two and five and then every other year in two-year cycles. Even with the long breeding season, delayed implantation enables all cubs to be born at about the same time.

Cubs are inquisitive and often wrestle with each other. They stay with the adult females until they are about 1½ years old. Most yearlings average 100 pounds or more, but their size can vary greatly depending on the number of bears in an area and the amount of available food.

Black bears make a variety of sounds, including a whine, cough, snort, sniff, bawl, growl and woof.

## MANAGING NEW YORK BLACK BEARS

Observing a black bear in the wild can be a thrill. For many, simply knowing wild bears exist in the state or seeing their tracks or sign (such as claw marks on tree trunks) is enough. However, some people feel apprehension because

of a bear's size and strength, while others are annoyed by the damage some bears cause to crops and private property. Balancing these sometimes conflicting human desires and the requirements for healthy bear populations is a constant challenge for wildlife managers.

At one time, the black bear was considered an unacceptable nuisance in New York State. During the 1800s, bears were completely unprotected and in the early 1890s a bounty was offered. This, coupled with habitat loss because of the clearing of forests, caused bear populations to decline. Today, however, through active management and increased forest land, our bear populations are very healthy and benefit from a delicate coexistence with people. Recently, DEC solicited public input regarding black bears in the state. This resulted in several recommendations, including expanding areas open to bear hunting to reduce problems caused by bears, and to increase hunting to control populations. In addition, DEC is considering reopening some bear hunting areas in southern and western NY. Such actions will help ensure bear populations remain healthy, and at the same time will lessen human-bear conflicts. In the meantime, almost all of us can help reduce conflicts by preventing the habituation of bears who access our foods, garbage or bird seed.

Visit DEC's website at [www.dec.state.ny.us](http://www.dec.state.ny.us) for more information on black bears in New York State.

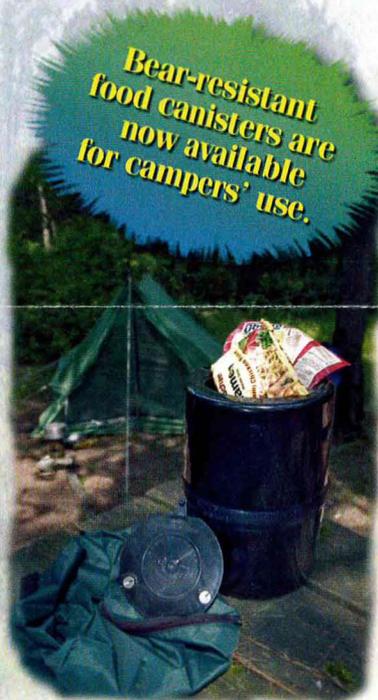
## Avoiding Human/Bear Conflicts

Bears normally have a natural fear or wariness of people. Unfortunately, bears that associate people with food, including garbage and bird seed, can lose that fear and become habituated to people. Habituated bears are far more likely to be involved in problems, such as destruction of property in their quest to access food. Although many feel that the best solution is to relocate habituated bears, that is seldom effective in reducing or eliminating these problems.

Black bears are highly intelligent and learn by association. For example, bears have learned to associate backpacks and ropes in trees as possible sources of food. They will chew through any vertical rope they find and rip open backpacks, hoping to obtain an easy meal. In some areas, such as the Adirondacks, the encounters have become so numerous that DEC recently instituted a new regulation requiring overnight campers in the Eastern Adirondack High Peaks to use an approved bear-resistant canister to store all food, garbage, toiletries and other items attractive to bears. Other sources where bears look for food include bird feeders (and the posts holding the feeders), coolers, dumpsters, garbage bags or cans and occasionally cars and buildings.

The best way to minimize human/bear conflicts is to teach people how to reduce or eliminate the availability of unnatural foods. Unfortunately, some people deliberately feed bears by making food available near roads, campgrounds or homes. This leads to problems and is illegal. Remember—remove the food and you remove the bear.

**Bear-resistant food canisters are now available for campers' use.**



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**NEW YORK STATE DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION**

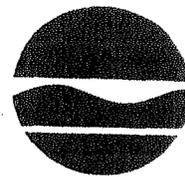


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New York State Department of Environmental Conservation  
Division of Fish, Wildlife and Marine Resources, Region 3  
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## BLACK BEARS FOR NEIGHBORS?

Black bears are more common in New York than most people realize, with the population estimated to be near 5,000. While the largest concentration of bears is in the Adirondack Region, substantial populations also exist in the Catskills and Western New York and New Jersey, resulting in bears constantly roaming into Southern New York looking to establish new home ranges.

The black bear is New York's second largest land mammal. An average adult female weighs 150 pounds. Adult males are considerably larger, averaging 300 pounds with occasional animals tipping the scale at over 600 pounds. Black bears typically range over large areas, with some home ranges covering hundreds of square miles. Black bears eat both plant and animal foods, but the bulk of their diet is usually plant material. Animal foods are usually ants, grubs and animals that are already dead or partially decayed. Above all, the black bear is an opportunist and will take advantage of almost any readily available food source.

Your chances of seeing a black bear in the wild are low because of a strong instinct to avoid people. But this fear of people has not remained in all bears. It is lost in the individuals attracted to unprotected food and garbage. These attractions often take unusual forms that we don't think of. Bird feeders are by far the most common attraction. This is not a problem during the winter months when most people are feeding birds and bears are denning. However, many people like to feed birds year round and this ready source of food becomes quite an attraction. Other common attractions include pet food left outside for cats and dogs when it is not completely eaten by the pet each day, livestock feed that is left unprotected and grease and odors left on the outdoor barbeque grills. Bee hives have always been an attraction, but bee keepers in bear country learned long ago the necessity and effectiveness of electric fences in protecting their hives.

FOOD is the "key" word here. Living with bears in bear country is easy if you just keep that in mind. If a bear shows up, remove the attraction immediately and the bear usually disappears within a day or two. If you insist on leaving something out that is attractive to bears, you must protect it with something like an electric fence or by making it physically inaccessible. Problems often arise when people intentionally put food out to attract bears for observation or photography. This can quickly get out-of-hand and unforeseen damage can occur, or it can create problems for unsuspecting neighbors. It should be noted that it is illegal to feed bears.

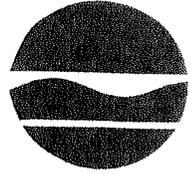
It was long ago recognized the kind of problems this activity creates.

People often ask, "Why doesn't DEC just trap and remove or relocate these problem bears?". DEC rarely traps and moves bears for several reasons. In bear country, removing the bear and leaving the attraction is a very short term solution; it doesn't take very long for another bear to come along and find the attraction. Vacant territories are very quickly taken over by other bears. Black bears also have a homing ability that we do not fully understand. Adult bears have a very strong attraction to their home range and if moved, return very quickly. In Southeastern New York, we have moved bears as far as 60 miles only to have them return to the exact capture location in several days. For both of these reasons, the manpower and expense of moving a problem bear is neither effective or cost efficient. Removal or securing the food attraction will almost always eliminate the presence of a bear.

The issue of human safety is always on the minds of people who see a bear near their house. Black bears are impressive animals and reactions to them are based on expectations of what a bear could do as opposed to what bears actually do. Wild animals of any size should not be approached, touched or fed. Black bears almost always retreat and avoid humans if possible. Bears that have learned to associate food with humans or houses can become persistent. Once again, removal of food and sometimes additional negative conditioning will change the bear's habits.

Want more information on black bears? If you have access to the Internet, go to the DEC Web Page for Black Bear information at:

[www.dec.state.ny.us/website/dfwmr/wildlife/wildgame/bear.htm](http://www.dec.state.ny.us/website/dfwmr/wildlife/wildgame/bear.htm) or go to the web site of the North American Bear Center at [www.bear.org](http://www.bear.org). and you'll find information on black bears, human safety, living with bears, what to do if you see a bear and bear life history.



## BEARS AND BIRD FEEDERS

Although many people find it difficult to believe, an animal as large and powerful as a black bear is readily attracted to bird feeders as a source of food. Black bears are, for the most part vegetarians, and bird seed, even in minute quantities, is a highly desirable food for them. In many cases, it is the food of choice and will be sought out over other natural foods. Bear nuisance complaint records from the Region 3 DEC Office in New Paltz reveal that at certain times of the year, bird feeders are involved in over 80% of the bear problems. First and foremost, bears are readily attracted to back yards because of the presence of bird feeders. The problem often escalates to other food sources such as garbage cans, barbeque grills and compost piles as bears become bolder and more acclimated to people. Such activities are not in the best interest of either the bears or the homeowners. Bears that learn to approach one house will approach other houses and invariably this results in concern from non-suspecting people.

**What to do???** It is important to break the pattern of black bears coming to houses for food. Fortunately, most bird feeding activities occur during winter when bears are in their dens. When bears emerge their dens in March, natural foods are not abundant and bird feeders represent a readily abundant food source. It is highly recommended that bird feeding activities cease at that time if you live in bear country. It is also important to remember that residual seed remaining on the ground will also be attractive to the bears. It should either be removed or treated with a covering scent such as ammonia. Some people start feeding again during early summer and closely monitor their feeders. If any bears return, they immediately cease their operation.



Many people feel they can outsmart the bears by taking their feeders in at night. This may offer some relief, however, there is usually enough residual feed from daytime feeding to

continue to attract bears. Others attempt to place the feeder high and out of reach of the bear. A bear's sense of smell is so great that the feeder will continue to attract the bear and will not discourage the bear from spending considerable time trying to figure out how to reach it. Some people have had success by mixing cayenne pepper with the bird seed to make it less palatable. This practice has some value with individual bears who will learn to avoid specific feeders, however, in bear country, every bear that finds the feeder will have to knock it down to learn that it contains pepper and is not a good feeding station. Removal of the attraction is the only long term solution.

Some homeowners receive great satisfaction from their bird feeding activities and are reluctant to stop feeding. Keep in mind that any feed placed out for wildlife is not species specific...it is impossible to pick and choose which animals will be attracted and which animals will not. The choice is up to the individual; however, any activity which results in attracting black bears close to homes should be carefully considered. The resulting presence of bears affects their neighbors and, in the long run, does more harm to the bears than good. Bears that become accustomed to houses and people become chronic nuisances, suffer diet deficiencies from continued improper foods and often end up hit by cars or shot illegally by people who misunderstand their intentions.

As is the case with almost all bear-human conflicts; if you take away the food, you will take away the bear. A simple saying also applies..."***A fed bear is a dead bear***".

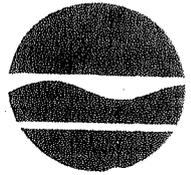
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### PREVENTATIVE MEASURES FOR BLACK BEARS

“Good housekeeping” is a requirement in black bear country. Simple sanitation measures can be the key to preventing bears around houses and in camp areas. The following list contains techniques that we recommend to prevent attracting bears.

1. Discontinue the practice of feeding suet and/or bird seed to birds for the entire summer. Bird feed is a very strong attraction even if they can't reach it.
2. Do not leave garbage outside of houses or garages. (Grease, fat, bacon and other meats are extremely attractive to bears. These items should be disposed of in sealed containers).

**NOTE: Burning makes garbage more attractive.**

3. Clean garbage cans and other refuse containers frequently with ammonia, bleach or Lysol.
4. Place camphor disks (available from some drug stores) in garbage cans to mask food odors. Other items may work as well, e.g. mothballs, air fresheners, Lysol and ammonia-soaked rags.
5. Use plastic bags inside garbage cans to help hide odors.
6. Store garbage cans in a secure place such as a garage, rather than storing them on a porch.
7. Empty garbage dumpsters at camping areas after dinner to decrease the chance of attracting bears. Construction of a garbage storage facility may be necessary when dump facilities are not open daily.
8. Remove the grease can from gas and charcoal grills after every use. Turn the grill on “High” for several minutes after you are done cooking.
9. Clean barbeque pits and grills thoroughly before leaving them outside. (We recommend using aluminum foil and cleaning these items with an ammonia cleaner).

10. Do not place food outside to attract raccoons, squirrels or other wildlife.
11. Clean old refrigerators and other insulated containers that are left outside.
12. Turn off kitchen exhaust fans that vent to the outside when not in use. Make sure the vent screen is cleaned regularly.
13. Do not feed family pets outside. An empty dish can attract a bear.
14. Leave outdoor lights on, or a radio playing all night.
15. Do not hand-feed bears from cars at campgrounds and dump sites.

**NOTE: A bear is a wild animal and should be respected. We discourage feeding practices of all types.**

16. Do not leave dirty diapers or diaper pails outside.

**REMEMBER: Bears are attracted by smells...With the exception of ammonia, Lysol, camphor and other strong smells, everything smells like potential bear food.**

**REMOVE THE FOOD ATTRACTANT AND  
YOU'LL REMOVE THE BEAR.**

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