



Black Bear

North Carolina Wildlife Profiles



Black Bear

Ursus americanus

There are three species of bears in North America—the polar bear, the brown (grizzly) bear and the black bear. The black bear is the only species found in North Carolina or anywhere in the eastern United States and is an important part of North Carolina's cultural, historical and natural heritage.

History and Status

Before Europeans came to the New World, black bears lived in all forested regions of North America and were abundant in the area that would one day become North Carolina. However, like mountain lions and gray wolves, black bears were often killed by early settlers to protect their families, crops and livestock. In time, bears across the state were impacted by human development. By the early 1900s, black bears were found only in the most remote mountains and coastal swamps of the Tarheel State.

Compounding the decrease in available habitat, the American chestnut blight (a tree-killing fungus) hit the Mountain Region in the 1920s, causing the loss of the most important nut-producing tree for bears and other species of wildlife. As a result, bear populations suffered. Mountain lion and gray wolf populations never recovered, but the black bear has made a remarkable recovery in both population and range over the last 30 to 40 years.

Bears have come back to the state without the aid of stocking efforts like those used to bring back wild turkeys and white-tailed deer. Black bear expansion has occurred naturally as bears have moved into suitable, but previously unoccupied, habitats at a rapid rate. As of the late 2000s, there were approximately 11,000 bears in the state, occupying 50% of the state's total land area.

Description

The black bear is an omnivore with a diet of both plants and animals. In North Carolina, the black bear is usually black with a brown muzzle and sometimes a white patch on its chest. In other areas of North America, black bears can be a very common brown color or a more rare blue and white.

All bear species have five toes on each foot and each toe has a sharp curved claw enabling the bear to feed on insects and grubs in decaying logs. Black bears rely mostly on their sense of smell and hearing due to poor eyesight, but are adept at climbing, running, swimming and digging. They have been clocked at speeds of 35 miles per hour over short distances.

Habitat and Habits

Bears prefer large expanses of uninhabited woodland or swampland with dense cover. In the east, lowland hardwoods, swamps and pocosins, provide good

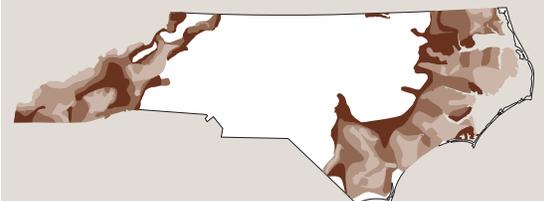
According to Cherokee legend, the bear is the keeper of dreams.



Range and Distribution

- Bears are very common in the Mountain and Coastal regions of North Carolina but rarely live in the heavily populated Piedmont.
- Bears live in an area (home range) of 5,000 to 50,000 acres depending on their gender and the quality of the habitat. Ranges often overlap in high-quality habitats.
- Male bears sometimes fight each other during the summer breeding season, and young juvenile males are often forced to leave areas inhabited by large, dominant male bears.

Range Map



- Occupied range 1971
- Occupied range 1971-1981
- Occupied range 1981-1991
- Occupied range 1991-2001
- Unoccupied range

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bear habitat. Recent research has shown bears to be much more adaptable to habitat changes than previously thought.

Bears put on additional weight in autumn to prepare for winter denning. They build dens in cavities of live trees, hollow logs, caves, rock outcroppings, cavities in the ground, or in a thicket. Usually black bears construct nests of leaves, sticks, and grass within the den, which often resemble giant bird nests. In North Carolina, den entry can occur as early as the end of November or as late as the beginning of January. Most North Carolina bears emerge from their dens in March or early April, depending on the weather and food availability.

People Interactions



Plott Hound

The black bear is a very shy, non-aggressive animal that avoids human beings in most cases. Occasionally bears wander into towns or residential areas in search of food. In coastal areas where agricultural products like corn, peanuts, soybeans and wheat are common, bears often feed on and damage these crops.

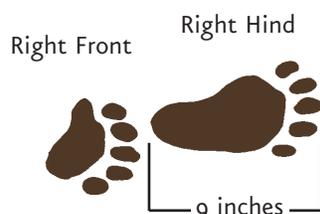
Bears should never be fed human-processed foods, such as garbage, pet food or bird food. Dependence on human food may cause bears to pursue these foods and can lead to increased interaction with people. Frequent bear-human

contact can cause bears to become aggressive and dangerous.

Approximately 500,000 acres of land have been designated as bear sanctuaries by the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission. These areas permit bear populations to thrive. Bear populations are stable or increasing in most areas of North Carolina.

Bear hunting is a tradition dating back to early Native Americans who depended on bears for meat, fat to season foods, and hides to make clothing. Early colonists in North Carolina quickly learned from the Indian tribes and developed a strong bear-hunting tradition that continues into the 21st century. Today, approximately 70 percent of hunters use hounds to pursue bears, including the Plott Hound—the official North Carolina state dog and famous bear-hunting breed. The Plott Hound breed originated in the mountains of North Carolina around 1750 and is the only breed of dog known to have originated in this state.

Tracks



Wild Facts

Classification

Class: Mammalia

Order: Carnivora

Average Size

Length: 5-6 ft.

Height: 2-3 ft. on all fours

Weight: adult females 100-300 lbs.;

adult males 200-700 lbs.

The current world record black bear, from Craven County, North Carolina, weighed 880 lbs.

Food

Acorns, berries, carrion, corn, fish, frogs, fruits, grasses, grubs, honey, insects, larvae, leaves, nuts, peanuts, reptiles, roots, seeds, small mammals, soybeans and wheat.

Breeding

Males are called boars and females are called sows. Bear reproduction depends on delayed implantation. While the egg is fertilized in the summer, it is not implanted in the womb until late fall or early winter. Cubs are born about eight weeks after implantation.

Young

Young are called cubs. Cubs usually stay with their mother through their first winter. Yearling siblings may stay together for another year. Bears live up to 20 years or more.

Life Expectancy

Average 4-5 years; few live longer than 10 years. Oldest wild bear was 26.

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NCWRC Interaction: How You Can Help

In a world where declining wildlife species make news on a daily basis, the successful comeback of the American black bear represents one of wildlife management's greatest achievements. Black bears were restricted to remote areas and reached very low population levels in the early 1900s. Today, black bears are found on almost 50 percent of the total land area of North Carolina. Biologists trap and release live bears and attach radio collars to monitor the bears' home ranges and habitat use.

Rising bear populations can have consequences. In many areas of the state, humans and bears increasingly are coming into contact. The N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission uses management efforts that increase population in some areas and contain population levels in others. You can help, too. Never feed bears or any wild animal, even accidentally with your trash. If you see a bear, try to stay calm and keep a safe distance. If you happen to meet a bear at close range, back away slowly and make lots of noise.

The Commission has implemented a long-term education program to inform citizens about this majestic species and released an Interactive DVD (IDVD), *The Bear Facts, The Story of a North Carolina Treasure*. To learn more about this IDVD, visit our Web site at www.ncwildlife.org and click on *Wildlife Species and Conservation*, then *Species*, and then *Black Bear*.



Q&A

1. Name the three different kinds of bear found in North America. Which bear is the only one found in North Carolina?

The polar bear, the brown (grizzly) bear and the black bear. The black bear is the only species found in North Carolina.

2. What three things caused a change in the once-abundant black bear population?

- Early settlers killed bears to protect their families and for food and fur.
- Human development forced bears from original habitats.
- The blight that killed mountain chestnut trees caused the loss of the most important nut-bearing tree for bears.

Links

To hear what a black bear sounds like, go to <http://animals.nationalgeographic.com/animals/mammals/black-bear.html>.

For video, go to <http://www.bear.org/>.

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Credits

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