

## BLACK BEAR

Phylum: Chordata, Class: Mammalia, Order: Carnivora, Family: Ursidae  
*Ursus americanus*

The American black bear is one of eight species of bears found throughout the world. Bears are found on every continent except Australia and Antarctica. The polar bear is the largest of the bears and sometimes weighs over 2,000 pounds. The smallest species is the sun bear, which often weighs less than 100 pounds.

**Weight:** 125-400 lbs.

**Height (at shoulder):** 2.5 - 3 feet

**Lifespan:** Bears can live 30-40 years.

**Habitat:** forests - swampy areas to mountainous regions; tundra

**Range:** various areas throughout North America - see map

**Diet in the wild:** The black bear's diet is mainly (75-90%)

Approximate range of *U. americanus*

Map taken from Grzimek's Encyclopedia of Mammals.

vegetation. They eat foliage, fruits, berries, nuts, insects and their larvae, small mammals, fish, and carrion.



### Status:

- Biologists recognize approximately 16 subspecies of American black bears. An estimated 500,000 American black bears are found in North America.
- While many populations are stable and controlled hunting occurs, populations of certain subspecies of American black bears are decreasing. Currently, the Louisiana black bear (*U. a. luteolus*) is classified as Threatened by the United States Fish & Wildlife Service. The Florida black bear may be the next to join the endangered list.
- American black bears are listed as CITES Appendix II. CITES, The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, is a United Nations treaty with over 100 member states and provides a means for regulating international trade in wild animals and plants.



### Threats to survival:

**Habitat loss**, due to an increasing human population, has been a major factor in the decline of the Louisiana black bear and nearly all of the other types of bears.

**Poaching** (illegal hunting) and **over-hunting** (unregulated hunting, beyond what the population can sustain) have also been major factors in the drastic decrease in other bear species. Bears are killed for their fur, claws, teeth, and other body parts. Bear gall bladders, meat, brain, bone, blood, spinal cord, and paw are used in **traditional Asian medicines**.

**Bear gall bladders** are the most highly prized of the bear parts. A bear gall bladder may bring US \$6,000 - 18,000+ in the Orient. Gall bladders contain **bile salts**. The salts have been used by traditional Chinese doctors since the 6th century AD and are believed to help cure fever, intestinal, liver, and cardiac-related illnesses. "Contrary to popular western belief, bear gallbladders are not prescribed as aphrodisiacs." (McCracken 1).



### Special features:

- A male bear is called a **boar**; a female, a **sow**.
- **Biologists often disagree on whether or not American black bears truly hibernate.**
- Bears lay down **layers of fat** to help them cope with periods of food scarcity and to provide insulation.
- Bears may be perceived as lumbering, clumsy beasts. However, bears are quite **strong and can move quickly**. They can run more than 30 miles per hour over short distances. Their strong forelimbs help them climb trees. They will often climb trees to escape danger.
- American black bears **aren't always black**. There are “black” bears that are actually white (the K mode bear), blonde, “blue”, and cinnamon brown.
- Bears walk **plantigrade** - flat-footed, like humans.
- Black bears have 5 digits on each limb, each possessing a curved claw. Bear claws are not retractable. Their long front **claws** (3-5 in.) can be dangerous weapons, but are more often used to dig up food or catch fish.
- **Predators/enemies** to the American black bear - brown bears, wolves, humans
- Black bears have **42 teeth**, including 2 large canines on both the upper and lower jaw.
- Bears have a good **sense of smell**, a “moderate” sense of hearing, and poor eyesight (Burt 46).
- Although it is often hard to see, black bears do have a **short tail**.

### Social organization & Behavior:

- American black bears are mainly **solitary**.
- The size of a bear's **home range** depends upon the availability and abundance of different types of food. Home ranges may be as small as 1 square mile or as large as 100 square miles.
- Black bears will often make **dens** in a hollow log, under tree roots, or beneath a fallen tree.
- Brown bears and American black bears, usually males, may **mark their territory** by rubbing and scratching trees and scratching the ground.
- In the wild, black bears usually **feed in the evening or early morning** when it is cool, and seek shade during the heat of the day.
- Bear **vocalizations** range “from a loud growl when fighting to a *woof-woof* to warn cubs of danger and a whimper to call cubs” (Burt 46).

### Breeding & Care of Young:

- American black bears generally reach **sexual maturity** at 4-5 years of age.
- American black bears generally **mate** during May - July. Males “visit females repeatedly over a period of 2-3 weeks” (Ward 139).
- After a successful mating and egg fertilization, the developing embryo undergoes **delayed implantation**. The blastula is not implanted in the uterus until late fall/early winter, after which time embryonic development continues. **Gestation** is usually 220 days, which includes the period of delayed implantation.
- Cubs are usually **born** in the winter den **in January or February**. Usually 2 cubs are born per litter, but up to 4 have been reported. The tiny cubs weigh 8-12 ounces at birth and are born naked and blind. They require their mother's close care.
- Bear milk is very rich and the **cubs grow fairly rapidly**. The cubs open their eyes at 25-30 days of age. By the time the female leaves the den, about 2-3 months after birth, the cubs are usually large enough to be able to follow her.
- Young American black bears may be preyed upon by adult male bears or wolves. Female bears are often very protective of their young.
  - Young bears often **play**. Activities like play-fighting help prepare them for their adult life. Social play has also been observed in adult bears.



- Cubs are usually weaned when they are 7-8 months old, but usually stay with their mother until they are 2 years old.

#### Other bears:

- **Panda bear** (*Ailuropoda melanoleuca*)- fewer than 1,000 survive in the wild in China. They are classified as Endangered.
- **Sloth bear** (*Ursus ursinus*) - found in India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka. Fewer than 10,000 are believed to survive in the wild.
- **Sun bear** (*Helarctos malayanus*) - found in Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Myanmar, and southern China.
- **Asiatic black bear** (*Ursus thibetanus*) - found in various areas in Asia. They are Endangered.
- **Polar bear** (*Ursus maritimus*) - found in the Arctic. Population estimates range from 5,000-19,000 left in the wild. They are considered at “Lower Risk” for extinction but are their status in the wild is “conservation dependent” (IUCN).
- **Spectacled bear (Andean bear)** (*Tremarctos ornatus*) - found in northwestern South America. They are listed as Vulnerable by the IUCN.
- **Brown bears** (*Ursus arctos*)
- Three subspecies, *U. arctos arctos* (found in Italy), *U. arctos pruinosus* (found in Tibet), and *U. arctos nelsoni* (found in Mexico) are listed as Endangered by the USFWS (1/31/98). The **grizzly bear** (*U. arctos horribilis*) is listed as Threatened in the lower 48 states of the U.S. Fewer than 1,000 animals are left in this region due to habitat loss. (Populations in Alaska & western Canada, with 50,000 animals, are not classified.)

#### Other interesting facts:

- Many indigenous peoples respected and revered bears. Bears were held in high regard for their maternal behavior. Because of some of their similarities in appearance to humans - similar footprints, and the ability to stand on their hind legs - many believed that bears were like humans, and referred to them as cousins. There were mysteries surrounding bear hibernation and as a result, bears were often used as symbols of immortality. North American Indians believed that bears, along with many other animals, possessed great power, including healing powers. Bears frequently appear on the totem poles of Native Americans.
- While on a hunting trip in 1902, President Theodore Roosevelt refused to shoot a black bear. Toy bears were made to celebrate the event, and named “Teddy” after Theodore.

