

The Black Bear

Ursus Americanus or, as it is commonly known to us, the Black Bear is the best known and the most widespread species of bears in North America. In the 1500's there were an estimated 2 million Black Bears, there are only 200,000 bears remaining today.

Characteristics

Black Bears are medium-sized bears, usually averaging 61-159 kg (135-350 pounds), however, 272 kg (600 pound) individual bears have been found. Adult Black Bears stand slightly over 1 meter (3 feet) at the shoulder, they walk flat-footed, and each foot is tipped by long, powerful, non-retractable claws. Males are usually from twenty to sixty percent larger than the females.

The coat of Black Bears is predominantly black, smooth and short haired, however there exist a variety of colour variations: chocolate brown, cinnamon, or silver grey tending to off-white. Black Bears with white and pale blue coats, which are known respectively as the Kermode and Glacier Bears, also exist in small numbers. The Kermode Bear or the "Spirit Bear" is actually a subspecies of the Black Bear, contrary to the opinion of some people who think that this is a type of a polar or an albino bear. The Kermode Bear may have parents of whom both were Black Bears, but the two of them must have each had a recessive gene, which has made the offspring bear white. Due to the decreasing numbers of the Kermode Bear, it is being considered as a potential mascot for the 2010 Olympic Winter Games in Vancouver alongside other endangered species such as the Hoary Marmot and the Vancouver Island Marmot.

The face of a Black Bear is convex, when compared with the more concave profile of a Grizzly or Brown Bear. They have a short tail and short hair, meaning that they cannot use their tails or torsos to imply body language as many other animals can; this leads the Black Bears to use their head, neck and mouth to convey intent and emotion. The position of their head can demonstrate the emotion or feeling that the bear is experiencing. For example if a Black Bear walks with its head held below the shoulders it frequently results in a type of an aggressive behaviour. Facial and mouth expressions are used to intimidate other bears. Sounds such as snarling, and actions such as opening and closing the mouth rapidly while salivating, bearing teeth and making chomping noises often signifies an agitated or angered bear.

Black Bears might sometimes be mistaken for Grizzly Bears, but one significant difference is that Black Bears do not have the noticeable front shoulder hump of the Grizzly Bear.

Habitat

Black Bears are shy and solitary, they spend their lives seeking food and searching for a better place to live. They usually live in two types of habitats - mountains and coastal plains. The Black Bear preferred habitats in the mountains include oak, hickory and mixed hardwood forests, including laurel and rhododendron brushes. The home range for a male Black Bear in the mountains is over 60 square km (15,000 acres) and a female home range usually averages up to 11 square km (2,800 acres). In the coastal plains, the

habitats where Black Bears typically live are swamps and lowland hardwood forests. In the coastal plains area, the home range of a male Black Bear is about 45 square km (11,000 acres) and the females usually range over 8 square km (2,000 acres). In the Black Bear species, the males roam much more than the females, therefore their home range is much larger than that of the females. The habitats of Black Bears generally consist of large amounts of land, where the disturbance from humans is minimal.

The diet of Black Bears is very similar to that of the Grizzly Bears. They are omnivores who will consume almost anything; however, they are closer to being herbivores because vegetative matter makes up from eighty to ninety-five percent of their diet. During the spring, from the months of April to May, Black Bears eat only grasses. In June, they start adding insects, grubs and ants to their diet. In the fall their main sources of food are berries, mushrooms and acorns. Fall is a vital period of time for the bears because they must eat enough food to build up fat for their winter hibernating period.

Behaviour

Black Bears hibernate for between five and seven months each year. Preferred winter dens include small caves, crevices beneath deadfalls, and blowdowns that are created when trees fall down due to the weather or decay and in that way create a location for a den, underneath all of the branches and trunks. Typically, the females hibernate for longer periods of time than the males, especially when they are the source of food for cubs. They retire for hibernation earlier and leave the dens later. The body temperature of a Black Bear while it is hibernating falls to about 31 degrees Celsius (88 degrees Fahrenheit), from a normal body temperature of 38 degrees Celsius (101 degrees Fahrenheit). During hibernation the frequency of the bear's heartbeat decreases to about fifty percent, with other body functions diminished to forty or fifty percent.

Dormant bears also exist, they will become fully awake and alert in minutes if they are disturbed. They can usually be found in hollow trees, cavities formed in the ground or simply on a bed on the ground in a thicket.

Life Cycle

Black Bears first mate around the ages of 3.5 - 4.5 years, usually during the months of June and July. The gestation period lasts for about 220 days, after which the cubs are born in January or February in the mother's winter den. When just born, the cubs are blind and deaf, with a thin coat, weighing from only 450 – 680 grams (1/2 to 1 pound). Once born, the cubs start to develop rapidly on a diet of their mother's milk - this kind of milk is much higher in solids, total fats and proteins than the cow's milk that people drink. Soon, the cubs start to follow their mother everywhere all of the time. They learn where and how to find food, how to understand what is dangerous and what is to be avoided. The Black Bear cubs remain with their mothers for up to 2 years, when they become independent and leave by their second spring.

Threats

Black Bears can live to be around ten years old, but not only has the number of their population decreased, but their life expectancy depends greatly on the environment in

which they live as well. Prior to the European settlement of North America, approximately in the 1600's, Black Bears existed in abundant numbers, but both First Nations people and European settlers hunted them for sport, entertainment and clothing. Therefore, their population started to decline as the human population began to grow.

The downfall in their numbers was also caused by unrestricted hunting, trapping and habitat destruction of Black Bears in the years that followed the settlement of North America. Bear hunting is still an issue that raises concern today. Bear hunting is usually done with dogs, which find the scent of a bear and "tree" it, leaving the killing to the human hunter which is a simple, easy act for them. Illegal and therefore unregulated bear hunting has caused enormous declines in the Black Bear population. Nowadays, bears are not killed so much for pleasure or amusement, but for their organs that are worth thousands of dollars overseas. Poachers hunt bears down, kill them, and sell specific parts such as their teeth, claws and gallbladders for profit. An estimated ninety percent of bears' gallbladders end up for sale in South Korea for treating diabetes, liver problems, sexual disorders and heart conditions. Chinese medicine uses animal parts to treat diseases as well. Poachers believe that when a bear is afraid or hungry, the gallbladder becomes enlarged which leads to purposefully wounding a bear and letting it die slowly so as to increase the profits.

What We Can Do To Help

As long as we view animals as less worthy than ourselves, not only will the Black Bear population decrease, but many other species of bears - Grizzlies, Glacier Bears, and others will face possible extinction. We must try to preserve these beautiful animals who do not want anything from us; they are not violent and will not attack humans unless they believe that their young or their food are in danger.

People tend to want to be kind to bears by giving them food in parks, but these are usually the only bears that become angry at humans. Once wild animals become dependent on people to feed them, they become agitated if they are not given food and this is the only time that bears might attack humans in parks. The same issue of food may arouse concerns with humans who live in mountainous or coastal plains areas where bears naturally range. People create fruit or berry gardens, or leave garbage cans outside, and bears who become attracted to these smells may wander into people's backyards in search of the food that they sense. This natural search for food creates an opinion that bears want something from people, when the bear's natural instinct is to avoid all humans. Removing the food smell is an easy way to keep bears away from people's homes.

Humans can affect bears in many ways- their survival rate, their habitats and their numbers can be altered due to human actions. It is our responsibility to help protect bear habitat and ensure a healthy population remains in the future. If each one of us tries to preserve parks and wilderness then Black Bears and many other animals will have a greater chance to live longer lives. Therefore, the power really lies within our own hands.

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