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NORTHWEST WILDLIFE PRESERVATION SOCIETY

Black Bear

Ursus americanus



Photo credit: Darren Colello

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Ursus americanus or, as it is commonly known to us, the black bear is the best known and the most widespread species of bear in North America. In the 1500's there were an estimated 2 million black bears, there are around 400,000-500,000 black bears remaining today.

Characteristics

Black bears are medium-sized bears, usually averaging 160 kg (350 lbs). 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 around 25-40% larger than 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 black bear, simply with whitish fur, contrary to the opinion of some people who think that it is an albino. 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.

The face of a black bear is convex, when compared with the more concave profile of a grizzly 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 may often 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 a range of habitats such as mountains, forests and coastal plains. The black bear's 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. Males typically roam much more so than do females and their preference is areas undisturbed by human activity. .

Behaviour

Black bears are omnivores who will consume almost anything; however, they are closer to being herbivores because vegetative matter makes up to 80% 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, acorns and salmon. Fall is a vital period of time for the bears because they must eat enough food to build up fat reserves for their denning period through the winter. .

Black bears den for around five months each year, however this depends on range and weather. 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. The body temperature of a bear while denning falls to about 31 degrees Celsius (88 degrees Fahrenheit), from a normal body temperature of 38 degrees Celsius (101 degrees Fahrenheit). During this time, the frequency of the bear's heartbeat decreases to about fifty percent, with other body functions such as metabolism diminishing as well. Bears are actually not true hibernators such as ground squirrels and woodchucks. They are too large for their body processes to fall as low as true hibernating animals and if the climate is appropriate, bears may even leave their dens in winter.

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. 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 cubs will remain with their mothers for up to 2 years, when they become independent and leave by their second spring.

Threats

Black bears could live to 27 years old, however their life expectancy greatly depends on the environment in which they live. 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, poaching and habitat destruction. Bear hunting is still an issue that raises concern today. Illegal and therefore unregulated bear hunting has caused enormous declines in the 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, wildlife will remain threatened. 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 resources 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 large tracts of true wilderness to ensure a healthy population remains in the future.

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