

## **Right now: Winter Hibernation and Birth of *Ursus americanus* – the American black bear**

Perhaps no other animals have so excited the human imagination as bears. References to bears are found in literature, folk songs, legends, mythology, children stories, and cartoons. Bears are one of the first animals that children learn to recognize. Dominant themes of our folklore are fear of the unknown and man against nature, and bears have traditionally been portrayed as the villains to support those themes. A problem for black bears is that literature does not separate black bears from grizzly bears.

The American black bear, found only in North America is approximately 4 to 7 feet from nose to tail, and two to three feet high at the withers. It has small eyes, rounded ears, a long snout, a large body, a short tail, and shaggy hair. Wild males usually weigh between 125 and 500 pounds, females between 90 and 300 pounds.

Mammalian hibernation is a specialized, seasonal reduction of metabolism concurrent with the environmental pressures of scarce food and low ambient temperatures. Black bears are considered highly efficient hibernators. They sleep for months without eating, drinking, urinating, or defecating. In mid to late January/early February, mothers wake up to give birth to Cubs weighing 1/2 to 1 pound. The number of cubs in a litter is usually 3 in the eastern United States. First litters are often only 1 or 2. Litters of as many as 6 have been reported in several eastern states.

### **Some interesting facts:**

**Vision:** Bears see in color and have good vision close-up. **Hearing:** Exceeds human frequency ranges and probably twice the sensitivity. **Sense of smell:** Extremely good. The limits are untested. Their nasal mucosa area is about 100 times larger than in humans. **Intelligence:** Large brain compared to body size. One of the more intelligent mammals. Navigation ability is superior to humans. Excellent long-term memory. **Sounds:** Usually silent (except in movies in which sounds are incorrectly dubbed in). Makes a variety of grunts in amiable situations and loud blowing noises or clacking of teeth when frightened. They use a resonant, humanlike “voice” to express a range of emotions from pleasure to fear. They do not threaten by growling. **Swimming Ability:** Good. Can swim at least a mile and a half in fresh water. Can swim to island campsites. **Running Speed:** Lean bears can exceed speeds of 30 mph. Can run uphill, downhill, or on level ground. **Preferred Foods:** Nuts, acorns, fruit, insects, succulent greens. Meat and less succulent greens are eaten when preferred foods are scarce. **Potential Lifespan:** Black bears can live over 20-30 years. **Causes of Death:** Very few adult bears outside of national parks die of natural causes. Nearly all adult bears die from human-related causes. Most are eventually shot. A few are killed by vehicles. The average age of death in hunted populations is three to five years of age. Bears less than 17 months old sometimes die from starvation, predation, falls from trees, and other accidental causes. Very few die of disease.

**Greatest misconception:** The greatest misconception about black bears is that they are likely to attack people in defense of cubs. They are highly unlikely to do this. Black bear researchers often capture screaming cubs in the presence of bluff-charging mothers with no attacks. **Defense of cubs is a grizzly bear trait.** About 70 percent of human deaths from grizzly bears are from mothers defending cubs, but black bear mothers have not been known to kill anyone in defense of cubs. **Do we have *Ursus americanus* in Charlton: You bet!**

Facts from *Watchable Wildlife: The Black Bear*, Lynn L. Rogers, PhD