



## American Black Bear

### What color is an American Black Bear?

Well, some members of the species *ursus Americanus* are black. But the American black bear may vary in color from blonde to red to shades of brown to—of course—black. A patch of white hair on the chest is not uncommon.

Black bears used to roam in all areas of North America, except in the Great Plains, deserts, and the barren areas of northern Canada. Today, they may still be found in parts of 38 states, including Arizona. The brown bear, or grizzly, had a similar historical range. Unfortunately, because grizzlies were more actively exterminated and are more sensitive (i.e., less adaptable) to the presence of humans, today the only places in which you might encounter a brown bear are Yellowstone, northwestern Montana, western Canada, and Alaska.

Timber, open timber with dense shrubs, and riparian areas are favored by bears. This is likely because these areas tend to have better water supply and, therefore, provide better cover and higher quality and quantities of food resources. Those areas also offer better denning sites. Dens are often dug underground or into hillsides, but may be located under dense shrubbery or fallen trees or within hollow trees.

Upon exiting their dens in the spring, bears will exist primarily on grasses and broadleaf flowering plants. These appear first at lower, warmer elevations. As the weather warms and the snow cover recedes, bears follow the green-up to higher elevations. Because bears don't digest plant material well, they must consume huge amounts these foods just to survive. They may even continue to lose weight during this period.

As the grasses begin to dry up during the heat of the summer, bears will rely more heavily upon insects, especially ants and sometimes bees & wasps, which they find in logs and under rocks. They may eat some birds, elk, and deer. However, less than 2% of their diet consists of such meat.

The berry season arrives in late summer at the higher elevations. Finally, the bears have access to nutritious,

high energy foods! This is the time of year when bears put on weight, storing fat reserves for the winter. As the weather cools, they follow the berry supply to ever lower elevations.

At some time in mid October or early November, bears enter their dens to hibernate. The beginning of hibernation is dictated more by the food supply than by weather. During hibernation, their heart and respiratory rates will slow significantly, but their body temperatures will drop only slightly. They will exit their dens in mid to late April, much thinner than when they entered.

Bears do not defend a territory. Instead, each has a home range which may overlap with bears of both sexes. However, bears are not social animals. Adults will only spend 2-5 days together during mating season, which may be anytime from mid May through early August.

When bears reach sexual maturity is determined more by size than age. This may happen anywhere from 4 to 7 years of age, depending upon the quality and quantity of food that's been available. Because cubs will spend 15-17 months with their mothers, females can breed only every other year at most. If food resources are scarce and a female is malnourished, she may not breed at all during that season.

After mating, the fertilized egg is implanted in the wall of the uterus. It will not begin to grow until December. Then, in late January or early February, the cubs will be born in the den. Litters may consist of 1 to 3 cubs, and litter size seems to be directly related to the abundance of food resources, especially berries, available to the mother during the fall.

The cubs will weigh only 8-12 ounces and their eyes will be closed, but they will have hair. They will spend their first summer and the next winter with their mothers. Then, in late May or early June of their second summer, the yearlings will break away from their mothers.