



## **Bear Facts**

### *Interesting Information about Black Bears in Virginia*

- Black bears are described as shy, gentle, usually solitary animals that are very rarely known to be aggressive. Bears most often attempt to avoid humans and stay away from homes. When more than one bear is seen together it will usually be a family unit (sow with cubs or yearlings) or during the summer breeding season.
- Although bears have poor eyesight (they are nearsighted – see poorly at longer distances), they have exceptionally good senses of smell and hearing.
- Adult female black bears breed every other year and give birth from early January to early February while in the den.
- Female black bears give birth to 1 to 4 cubs (average 2.5), each weighing 6 to 12 ounces while the sow is in their winter bear den. The cubs are blind at birth, yet they have exceptionally well developed claws so they can climb around the den and on the sow to find the source of milk. Bear milk is very rich in fat and other nutritional substances. Cubs gain weight very fast and may grow 10 times their birth weight before leaving the den in April.
- Feeding cubs often make a unique “purring-type” sound when nursing that can often be heard when approaching a bear den.
- The cubs and yearlings stay with their mother until they are about 1½ years old and are ready to be on their own. By the time they reach one year old, the yearling bears may weigh 60 pounds or more.
- Black bears usually reach full maturity by age three and one-half years, although sows may breed earlier.
- Fully grown female bears (sows) usually weigh 125 to 250 (rarely over 300) pounds and are about 5 feet in length. Male bears (boars) are most often larger and usually weigh 200 to 400 pounds, occasionally exceeding 600 pounds. The largest bear ever documented in Virginia weighed 740 pound and lived in southeastern Virginia (Suffolk). The largest known wild black bear was found in eastern North Carolina; it weighed 880 pounds.
- Bears are probably most active at dawn or dusk (crepuscular), but can be active at any time, night or day, particularly when food is abundant. Bears have been known to feed on acorns as much as 20 hours in a day.
- In the wild, black bears in Virginia have been known to live to be 26 years old. The oldest wild bear was recently found in Pennsylvania to be 30 years old. Black bears may live longer in captivity.
- Using a microscope, wildlife biologists studying black bears can determine the age of a bear by counting the annuli (growth) rings in a tooth, much like counting the rings of a tree.
- Virginia has a healthy and growing black bear population in most of the state; there may be as many as 7,000 to 9,000 bears in the Commonwealth.

- Black bears have occurred in almost every county in Virginia, but the highest numbers are in the Appalachian Mountains and in and around the Great Dismal Swamp in the southeast.
- Black bears have no predators except humans. Hunting is the most effective tool wildlife managers have for population control. As black bear numbers have increased, the number of bears taken by hunters has increased from about 200 in the 1970s to more than 1,000 bears each year in recent years.
- Black bears spend a lot of time searching for food and eating. As they prepare to hibernate during the winter, bears may consume 10,000 to 12,000 calories a day, an amount equal to about seven loaves of bread. An adult male bear can gain more than 100 pounds during the fall, prior to denning, when large amounts of food such as acorns are available.
- While hibernating in the den, black bears do not eat, drink, defecate or urinate.
- In Virginia, black bears usually den in hollow trees, although some will den up in depressions in the ground, in brush piles, under upturned trees, in rock cavities and under rock overhangs.
- Black bears are very strong and very fast. They can climb a tree at six weeks old. They can outrun humans with their ability to run 40 miles per hour. They are also good swimmers.
- Their claws are not retractable like a cat, and they use them for climbing, digging for insects or small mammals, turning over large rocks, getting insect larvae from inside rotten logs and for manipulating food.
- Bears are omnivorous, meaning they eat plants and animals, although they are classified as carnivores (meat eaters). They eat insects, leaves, berries, nuts, fruit, or on occasion juvenile mammals such as fawns, or small mammals such as groundhogs, Amphibians such as lizards, and carrion (deer or other animals that have died from other causes) and even fish may be eaten by bears. Most (80+%) of their diet is vegetation or insects.
- Black bears are adaptable. Although black bears like remote, densely wooded habitats and swampy areas, they commonly frequent areas where timber has been cut for the berries and other foods that can be found there or for den sites. Bears are also commonly found in some farmer's fields eating corn, fruit in orchards and other crops. It is not uncommon for bears to make their home in more open habitats such as portions of the Shenandoah Valley or some Piedmont counties.
- Typically, bears fear and avoid people, but can be attracted to homes if they find food sources like garbage, pet food, crops, and bird feed. Property damage reports are received each year when foods such as pet food, garbage, fruits, bird seed or feeders and other food attractants are stored in screened-in porches or small out-buildings.
- Dogs should be kept on a leash or lead when bears are known to be near homes or when hiking in bear habitats. In Virginia, with the exception of a recent report, bears have never been known to attack a dog in a pen or chained to a wire run; however, when a dog is free to run up to a bear, usually barking, the bear will interpret this behavior as aggressive and defend itself with the result that some dogs are injured or killed.

- It is illegal to feed bears in Virginia because of the property damage that is common when foods are found near residences, and because of what may be a higher risk to humans. There has never been a confirmed attack by a bear on a human in Virginia, although rare black bear attacks have been reported in elsewhere, mostly in Alaska and Canada.
- When bears come around houses or damage property the most effective way to discourage this behavior is to remove and secure the food (i.e., garbage or bird feeders) that is attracting the bear. Property damage by bears and other bear problems should be reported to the VDGIF as soon as possible by direct contact or through the county sheriff's department. Trapping and other options are available from wildlife managers to assist land owners.