

Black Bear

Scientific Name: *Ursus americanus*



State
Endangered
Species

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Introduction

Although black bears inhabited Ohio prior to settlement of the region, unregulated hunting and the extensive deforestation that occurred by the mid-1800s as farms, towns, and industry were established resulted in a sizable reduction in the number of bears residing within the state's borders. Those bears that remained following this drastic change in habitat were either shot or trapped to protect livestock and crops from depredation. By 1850, black bears were considered extirpated from Ohio. However, occasional reports of their presence, particularly in south-central and southeastern Ohio, persisted and, in 1973, included a report of a sow (female) with cubs (offspring).

Reports of black bear sightings in the Buckeye State began to occur annually starting in the mid-1980s. This prompted the Division to develop a formal black bear reporting procedure in 1993. The number of reports received through this procedure varies somewhat from year to year, but currently numbers around 100 and has included verified observations of sows, or females, with cubs. The 50 or so reported sightings usually translate to about 40-50 individual bears, as some bears are reported more than once. Most of the reports are from our northeastern, east-central, and southeastern counties, especially those bordering Pennsylvania and West Virginia. These reports, coupled with the verified observations of adults with young strongly suggest that Ohio supports a small breeding population. The number of bears in the Buckeye State is expected to increase as bear populations in neighboring states continue to expand.

Most of the bear reports that have been received are believed to be young males (1 1/2 - 3 1/2 year olds). These bears have dispersed from Pennsylvania and West Virginia, where sizeable bear populations exist, in search of their own territories. Some of the bears that wander across Ohio's borders each year, upon finding suitable habitat and little competition from other bears, remain thus adding to the state's abundant wildlife diversity. Many others continue their travels, ultimately completing a loop that once again crosses the border between Ohio and its neighboring states. Occasionally, one of these wandering bruins comes into close enough contact with people that relocation of the bear to a more isolated environment is considered appropriate.

Even with the growth of this species' population in Ohio, the chances of seeing a black bear are slim. In the unlikely event that you do encounter a bear, leave it alone and allow it to go its own way. Bears are generally shy and try to avoid interaction with people. Keep in mind that more people die from bee stings each year than are injured by black bears. As an additional note, black bears are a protected species in Ohio and injuring or killing one is a violation of Ohio wildlife laws.

Description

The black bear is the most common species of bear in North America. The name "black" bear can be somewhat misleading as this species appears in a range of color phases that include black, chocolate brown, cinnamon brown, blue-black, and even white. Its face,

in profile, can be straight or Roman-nosed, a distinguishing characteristic that helps differentiate it from the dish-faced grizzly bear.

An adult black bear can weigh anywhere between 150 and 700 pounds. Males average 300 pounds while the smaller females average around 175. Males, when standing upright, measure between five and six feet tall; females, typical of mammals, are smaller, measuring four to five feet. On all fours, most adult black bears are between 2 1/2 and 3 feet at the shoulder. Prints from a black bear's front paw are about six inches wide. Those from the back paws are about eight inches long and leave a readily discernible heel mark. Both front and rear paws have five toes. This is remarkable growth for an animal that weighs about a half pound at birth. Considering their size, black bears are extremely mobile. They can outrun a human over a short distance and climb trees equally fast.

Habitat and Habits

Since Ohio has only recently had black bears within its borders and the current number of individuals is small, there is not a lot of information on this species specific to Ohio. As a result, our knowledge of both bear biology and behavior is based upon research results obtained from those nearby states having established black bear populations.

Black bears can be found from coast to coast throughout North America in a wide variety of the more heavily wooded habitats, ranging from swamps and wetlands to dry upland hardwood and coniferous forests, from the Yukon and Northwest Territory in Canada to the northern portions of Mexico. Although they will utilize open areas, bears prefer wooded cover with a dense understory.

Despite the black bear's territorial and solitary nature, some degree of mutual toleration, particularly between a sow and her young from a previous litter, occurs. Home range size appears to be influenced to a large extent by habitat quality, the bear's sex and age, and the number of other bears in the area. In the upland hardwoods of New York and Pennsylvania, for instance, home range size varies from 24 to 50 square miles for females and 100 to 120 square miles for males while 8.3 and 30.5 square miles have been reported for females and males, respectively, in swamp habitat in Virginia and North Carolina. With the type of habitat found in Ohio, one would expect the bruin's home range here in the Buckeye State to be more like that of New York and Pennsylvania.

Bears tend to wander around a great deal both inside and outside their home ranges, with the greatest movement occurring among young males. Movement of 100 miles or more from their birth or cub range has been recorded for some yearling males as they attempt to

establish their own territories. Bears are crepuscular, which means they are usually active early in the morning and late in the evening. They normally bed down most of the day and night. Bears in areas of high human population will often adjust this schedule and become more active at night when few people are about. Daytime travel is uncommon, but does occur during the breeding season and during the fall as the animals prepare for overwinter denning. At latitudes similar to Ohio, bears head to their overwinter dens between early November and mid-December. Emergence from the den generally occurs between mid-March through mid-April.

Bears are omnivorous, feeding on a variety of foodstuffs including fruits, nuts, insects, grasses and leaves, flowers, fish, carrion, and occasionally newborn mammals and birds. Their diet will change with the seasons based on the availability of various foods.

Reproduction and Care of Young

Bears, especially the males, are best described as promiscuous breeders; females may mate with more than one male, however a single male is most common. Females remain receptive to the male only until fertilization of the egg occurs. Breeding usually occurs from mid-June through mid-July; however, the fertilized egg is not implanted in the female until early December. Females are induced ovulators, meaning that the eggs are not released from the ovaries until mating has occurred. Following implantation, the sow carries her young for about six weeks. The young are born from mid-January through early February while the sows are in their overwinter dens. Sows and their cubs leave the dens when the cubs are approximately three months old. The young remain with the mother, who is the sole care giver, for the first year and a half of their lives.

Growth during a cub's first year is rapid. At birth, the sightless cubs weigh about eight ounces. By the time that the cubs open their eyes at about six weeks of age, they weigh between three and four pounds. Typically, cubs weigh between 25 and 65 pounds by September and may, provided high quality food is readily available, weigh nearly 70-80 pounds by the time they enter the overwinter den with the sow in early November.

In exceptional habitat conditions, a sow can breed for the first time at 2 1/2 years of age; however, most females are 3 1/2 years old. In the first litter, a sow usually produces a single cub; two or three young are normal for subsequent litters; as many as five offspring have been recorded in one litter. Sows generally breed every other year unless the litter is lost or the quality of the habitat is especially good.

Management Plans

Currently, the Division of Wildlife monitors reports of black bears as they travel and establish residency in Ohio. Other efforts focus on informing and educating the public about the black bears in the state.

Wildlife officers in counties where black bear sightings are most likely to occur have been trained on how to handle nuisance bear situations. In most instances, the bear can be trapped or tranquilized, and relocated to a more remote area.

Black bears are a small portion of the state's wildlife population. The species has been classified as endangered in the state. The Division is gathering data to better understand this species as its population grows and becomes established in the state. Hunting black bears in Ohio is prohibited.

Viewing Opportunities

Current bear populations in the state are still quite low. Because of this and their elusive nature, viewing opportunities are unlikely and a chance occurrence when they do happen.

Do Something Wild!

The Division of Wildlife has utilized money from the Do Something Wild! income tax checkoff to study species of special interest. Through the generosity of Ohio citizens who either donated through the checkoff or made their contribution to the Endangered Species and Wildlife Diversity Fund, the Division is able to sponsor special projects benefiting animals, like the black bear, that contribute to the wildlife diversity of the state.

Tax time is not the only time you can help. Contributions to our Endangered Species and Wildlife Diversity Program are accepted throughout the year. To make a donation, please send a check to: Endangered Species Special Account, Ohio Division of Wildlife, 2045 Morse Road, Bldg. G, Columbus, Ohio 43229-6693. All contributions, whether made on your tax return or directly, are tax deductible.

At a Glance

Mating: Promiscuous. Males in particular will mate with more than one individual, females do on occasion.

Peak Breeding Activity: Mid-June through mid-July.

Gestation Period: Black bears are delayed implanters. Implantation of the fertilized egg usually occurs during early December, with gestation requiring six weeks.

Litter Size: First litters generally have only one cub. Two or three cubs are usually produced in subsequent litters.

Young: Altricial. They are born sightless with a fine coat of fuzzy hair; weight is generally eight ounces at birth.

Number of Litters Per Year: Generally, one litter is produced every other year.

Adult Weight: 150 to 700 pounds; average is 300 pounds for males and 175 for females.

Adult Length/Height: 2 1/2 to 3 feet when on all fours, 4 to 6 feet when standing upright.

Life Expectancy: Can live to 25 or more years in the wild, but the average is less in populations where hunting occurs.

Home Range: Bears have a large home range and travel a great deal. Studies in other states indicate the home range of adult males to be 100 to 120 square miles in upland hardwood habitats, 24 to 50 square miles for females. Movements of 125 miles from a denning site have been documented.

Feeding/Travel Periods: Crepuscular- Active early in the morning and late in the evening. Daily timing of movements may be influenced by human activities. Bears in high human activity areas tend to be more nocturnal in their movements while dawn and dusk are the periods of primary movement among bears in low human activity areas.

Typical Foods: Bears are omnivores; they will eat a variety of foods from fruits and grasses to meat. Grasses, forbs, berries, mast from oak, hickory, and beech trees, carrion, and insects are typical foods. Bears will also utilize agricultural crops, if available.

Native to Ohio: Yes



Active or Potential Nuisance Species: Can become a nuisance, particularly around dumps and human populated areas. Bears can also do substantial damage to agricultural crops, especially beehives; an occasional bear may kill livestock. In situations where people feed bears, the bear can lose its fear of humans and become a nuisance or even aggressive toward

people. Feeding bears is totally discouraged. Current low populations present a low potential for conflict at the present time.

The black bear is classified as endangered in Ohio. As such, the species is afforded full protection.