



# Black Bear

by Chuck Fergus

One of Pennsylvania's premier big game animals is the black bear, *Ursus americanus*. The species ranges through much of forested North America from Mexico to Alaska and from Florida to northern Canada. In different regions, black bears exhibit different life patterns, denning times, tolerance of human activity, habitat preferences, home range, reproduction behavior, pelt coloration and even size and weight.

## Biology

Bears are powerfully built animals. Adults are 50 to 85 inches in length, including a three- to five-inch tail. They stand about 30 inches at the shoulder and weights range from 140 to 400 pounds, with some individuals weighing more than 800 pounds. Males, sometimes called boars, tend to be considerably larger and heavier than females (sows).

Most Pennsylvania bears are black, although a few are

cinnamon-color. (In other parts of its range, *Ursus americanus* may be brown, whitish, or bluish-gray, but the majority are black.) The body is glossy black, the muzzle tinged with tan. Often a bear will have on its chest a white mark, sometimes in a prominent "V." The fur is thick, long and fairly soft. Sexes are colored alike.

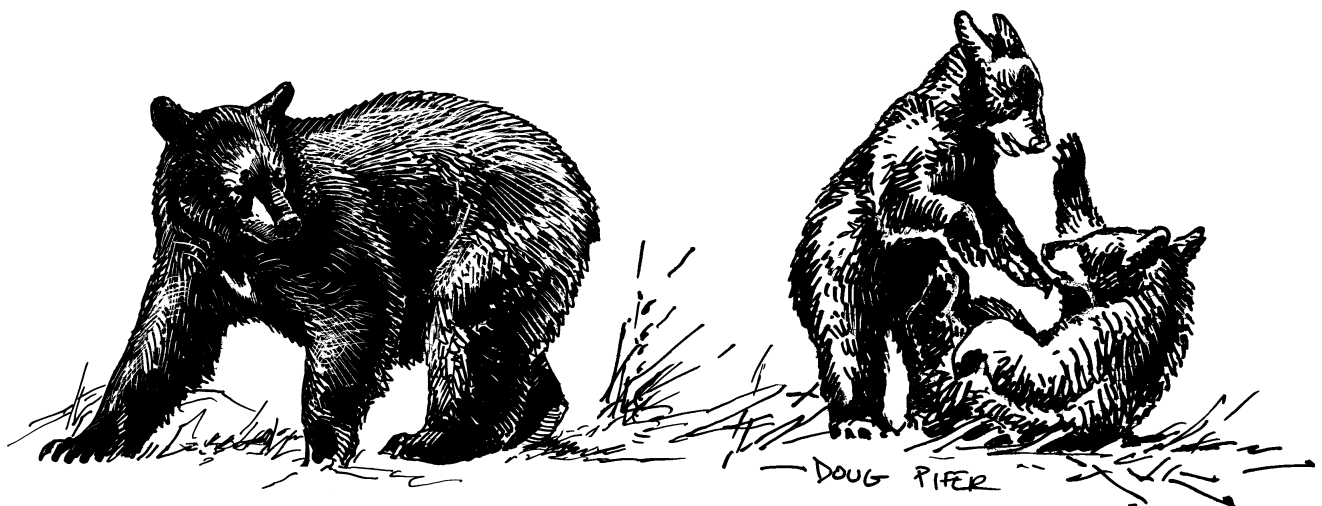
Bears walk in a shuffling, flat-footed manner. Each foot has five toes, each with a curved claw. Extremely agile for their size, bears sometimes stand erect on their hind feet to see and smell better. Top speed is 30 miles per hour over a short distance. Black bears climb easily and swim well.

Black bears have an acute sense of smell, but their vision is poor. Hearing is not believed to be acute. They occasionally growl or "woof," and when injured, sob and bawl. Sows communicate to their cubs with low grunts, huffs and mumbles.

Bears are mainly nocturnal, but they sometimes feed and travel by day. Alert and wary, they tend to avoid open areas. Individuals are solitary. While most bears will run from a human, a female with cubs should be respected, and on rare occasions might actually attack if she feels her young are in danger. Bears that become accustomed to humans (as in a park or garbage dump setting) are less likely to run away, making them potentially much more dangerous.

Bears find food mainly by scent. They are opportunistic feeders, with a largely vegetarian diet. Common foods are fruit (including large amounts of many kinds of berries), mast (acorns and beechnuts), succulent leaves of hardwoods, grasses, insects (including eggs and larvae), plant roots, amphibians, reptiles, small mammals, fish, carrion and garbage. An occasional bear runs afoul of humans by preying on pigs, goats or sheep; by eating corn; by raiding campers' food stores; and by destroying honeybee colonies (beekeepers with such problems should protect their hives with electric fences). Bears drink water frequently, and in hot weather they wallow in streams.

In autumn, bears eat heavily to fatten themselves for winter. The winter den may be a hollow tree or log, an excavation or a crevice in a rock ledge; it may be a "nest" on top of the ground, or under fallen trees or brush, in a cavity under a large rock or beneath the roots of a tree; or it may be in a drainage culvert or a depression dug in



the ground. Some bears line their dens with bark, grasses or leaves. Females often select more sheltered sites than males. Males den alone, as do pregnant females (they give birth in the den). Females with first-year cubs den with their young.

In winter, bears den up and become dormant. They lapse into and out of a deep sleep, from which they may be roused. Body temperature is not drastically reduced. Respiration and heart rate might decline noticeably. They do not urinate or defecate while dormant. Bears in poor condition den for shorter periods than those in better shape. On warm, late-winter days, they may emerge to look for food.

In some areas, bears create trails while covering the nightly circuits they run. Individuals may scar prominent trees with claw and tooth marks; these "bear trees" may mark a territory or signal availability during mating season.

Bears mate from early June to mid-July. It is generally accepted that they are polygamous. The male does not help rear young.

Females give birth to cubs in January while in the winter den. Litter sizes range from one to five, with three most frequent in Pennsylvania. Newborns are covered with fine dark hair, through which their pink skin shows. They are about nine inches long and weigh 10 to 16 ounces. Their eyes and ears are closed.

Cubs nurse in the den. After about six weeks, their eyes open. In about two more weeks, they walk. They leave the den when three months old, are weaned by seven months, and by fall usually weigh 60-100 pounds. Bears traveling in groups in autumn are usually females and their cubs.

Cubs are playful, romping in water and wrestling with their lit-



termates. The female protects them, sending them up trees if danger threatens. Males occasionally kill and eat cubs.

In most cases, cubs den with their mothers for their first winter. The family group disbands the following summer, when the female again is ready to breed. A female generally raises one litter only every two years. Most females breed for the first time when 2½ years old.

Mortality factors include hunting, damage control and highway kills. Bears host ticks and internal parasites. In the wild, a rare individual might live to 25 years.

### Population

In Pennsylvania, bears are found in large forested areas statewide. They are not typically found in large urban and agricultural areas. The total population currently is estimated to be 15,000.

Periodic harvesting, through hunting, helps minimize bear problems in agricultural areas — honeybee, livestock, crop destruction — and, in suburban areas.

### Habitat

Bears inhabit wooded country. In spring and summer, they frequent openings to feed on fresh vegetation and berries; in fall, they occupy dense, regenerating clearcuts and mountain laurel thickets. In the northeast — a pocket of prime bruin habitat — bears favor brushy swamps with rhododendron, blueberry and spruce. They also inhabit mixed hardwood forests, especially where underbrush is thick.

Bears range over large areas. Movement is affected by food availability, breeding activities and human disturbances. Although bears show remarkable adaptability in living close to humans, their numbers decline as their habitat shrinks. Protecting suitable wild lands, especially those containing wetlands, is probably the single best habitat management tool.



Wildlife Notes are available from the  
Pennsylvania Game Commission  
Bureau of Information and Education  
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Harrisburg, PA 17110-9797  
[www.pgc.state.pa.us](http://www.pgc.state.pa.us)

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