

## BEAR ENCOUNTERS

**BLACK BEARS AT A GLANCE** - Black bears are the most common and generally the smallest of North American bears which also include the grizzly or brown bear and the polar bear. Only the black bear is found in Arizona. A black bear may live 20 years in the wild and up to 25 or 30 years in captivity. They are very agile, can run in bursts up to 35 mph and can run up and down hills quickly and easily. They are strong swimmers and good tree climbers.

**PHYSICAL APPEARANCE** - The black bear, *Ursus Americanus*, is not always black. They come in a variety of color phases including black, brown and cinnamon (reddish or blond) and they may have a tan muzzle or a white spot on their chest. A black bear's body appears heavy and is supported by short powerful legs. The highest point of a black bear is the lower-middle of its back. There is no prominent shoulder hump as there is in the larger grizzly bear.

Black bears vary in size and weight with males usually being larger than females of the same age. Adult males average 275 pounds while the adult female may average 175 pounds. Depending on the season, food supply and gender, they may weigh anywhere from 125 to 450 pounds. When on all four legs, black bears measure about three feet tall at the shoulders and when upright on their hind legs, they may approach five or six feet tall.

**HABITS** - Bears may be active anytime, day or night, but are most often active during morning or evening twilight. When not feeding or looking for food they may rest in day beds - next to a log in a windfall, in dense brush or in a depression. Black bears are omnivores and eat both plants and animals. They are opportunistic feeders and will eat whatever food is available. About 90% of a bear's diet is made up of plant products while about 10% is animal or insect products. Acorns, juniper berries and madrone berries in season are major food sources for the bears. A major problem arises when bears become acclimated to human food. When this happens, these intelligent animals often overcome their fear of people and become more aggressive and persistent in their attempts to get more food. Black bears have long been viewed as forest dwelling animals. However, an unbroken expanse of forest doesn't provide enough food. They also need berry patches and stream bottoms to satisfy their appetites.

Every bear has a home range where it finds all it needs. It travels to different areas of its home range as food sources develop. In general, black bears may range from 10 to 250 square miles. Adult males occupy the largest areas while females usually establish their home range close to their mother's. Arizona winters are usually milder than many areas of the country so bears do not go into as deep of a hibernation. It is not unusual for bears to wake up and go searching for food several times during the course of a winter.

**HIKING IN BLACK BEAR COUNTRY** - Many of the mountain ranges in southern Arizona are home to black bears. Conflicts may arise when humans and bears occupy the same area. When hiking in bear country, it is always important to be aware of the potential of encountering a bear and to take every precaution to reduce conflicts. Although injury to humans by black bears is rare, it is always a possibility. Hiking at dawn or dusk may increase your chances of meeting a bear. Use extra caution in places where hearing and visibility is limited - in brushy areas, near streams, where trails round a bend or on windy days. Reduce

your chances of surprising a bear by making noise as you hike.

**BLACK BEAR ENCOUNTERS** - Every encounter with a black bear can be different, however, bears should always be considered unpredictable and dangerous. In almost all cases, the bear will detect you first and will leave the area. Bear attacks are rare compared to the number of close encounters. If you meet a bear before it has time to leave an area, the following suggestions should reduce the potential for a dangerous conflict.

+ **Stay Calm.** If you see a bear and it hasn't seen you, calmly leave the area. As you move away, talk aloud to let the bear discover your presence.

+ **Stop.** Never approach or corner a bear. Back away slowly while facing the bear. Avoid direct eye contact, as bears may perceive this as a threat. Give the bear plenty of room to escape. Stand upright. Do not kneel or bend over. Wild bears rarely attack people unless they feel threatened or provoked.

+ **Speak Softly.** This may reassure the bear that no harm is meant to it.

+ **Depart the Area.** Do not run or make any sudden movements. Running is likely to prompt the bear to give chase and you can't outrun a bear. Continue facing the bear and slowly back away.

+ **Bear Cubs.** Female black bears do not normally defend their cubs aggressively but send them up a tree. Use extra caution if you encounter a female black bear with cubs. Move away from the cubs. Never come between a bear and its cubs.

+ **Threat Identification.** Bears use all their senses to try to identify what you are. Their eyesight is good and their sense of smell is acute. If a bear stands upright or moves closer, it may be trying to detect smells in the air. This isn't a sign of aggression. Once it identifies you, it may leave the area or try to intimidate you by charging within a few feet before it withdraws.

+ **If Attacked.** Fight back aggressively. Black bears have been driven away when people have fought back with rocks, sticks, binoculars and even their bare hands.

Summarized January 2004 by T. Johnson from brochures prepared by the US Forest Service, Arizona Game & Fish Department, New Mexico Department of Game, the Colorado Division of Wildlife and the North American Bear Society.

**Additional Material:** GVHC Library File # 83