



Living With Wildlife

Black Bears in Massachusetts



Black Bear

Photo © by Bill Byrne

Though Massachusetts is the third most densely-populated state in the country (6 million people living in 5 million acres), black bears have been increasing in numbers and distribution for the past 35 years. The statewide population of bears is estimated to be over 4,000 animals. Black bears live and breed in Worcester County, northern Middlesex County and west to the Berkshires. Bears, mostly young males, have been seen in other eastern Massachusetts communities along Rte. 495. Biologists anticipate that sometime in the future, female bears will also move east, mate and raise young.

Description: Black bears are black overall with a brown muzzle and sometimes a white chest patch. Their feet are large and well padded, with moderate-sized, curved claws. Male black bears generally range in weight from 130 to 600 pounds and females from 100 to 400 pounds. In Massachusetts, males average 230 pounds, and females, 140 pounds. Lengths range from 3½ to 6 feet and shoulder height from 2½ to 3½ feet.

Life History: Black bears have good eyesight and hearing and an extraordinary sense of smell that is used both to locate food and to recognize potential danger. They are excellent climbers and commonly use trees for resting and escape cover and to protect their young. Black bears mate between mid-June and mid-July. After breeding, the fertilized egg develops into a minute ball of cells that remains free-floating in the uterus and only implants in the uterine wall in late November if the female is well nourished. The small cubs are born in the den in mid- to late January. Litters usually consist of two or three cubs. Cubs exit the den in early to mid-April and remain with the mother for about 17 months, at which time she comes into estrus (heat) again and chases the yearling bears away. Young females take up residence near their mother's area, but the young males wander for many miles. Bears are active in the daytime during spring and fall, but are more active at dawn and dusk in the summer.



Food: Bears are omnivores, meaning that they eat both vegetation and flesh; much of their diet consists of vegetative matter. In spring, bears consume lush emergent vegetation like skunk cabbage, and they will also search for leftover nuts in hardwood areas. In summer, they prefer emerging berry crops. Corn fields and oak, beech, and hickory stands are favored in the fall. They also eat grubs and insects, feed on carrion (dead animals), and occasionally prey on young deer. In addition to the cornfields already mentioned, bears are known to visit birdfeeders, orchards, and beehives, all of which can bring them into conflict with humans. Bears have good long-term memory and can remember the location of food sources years after the first visit.

Adult female bears typically use home ranges averaging 9-10 square miles, while adult males may have ranges exceeding 120 square miles. Depending on food availability, bears enter the den between mid-November and early December and exit between early March and mid-April. Bears commonly den in brush piles, under fallen trees or jumbles of rocks, or in mountain laurel thickets. During this period they sleep soundly, but may wake up and forage in mild weather or they may bolt if frightened.

What To Do When You See a Bear

Hikers, Hunters, Wildlife Viewers and Other Outdoor Users — Despite popular belief, black bears are usually wary of people. In woodland areas, bears may disappear long before they are seen by people. Sometimes, a bear may not immediately recognize you as a human and may be curious until it scents you. Make the animal aware of you by clapping, talking, or making other sounds. Do not approach bears. Do not intrude between a female bear and her cubs. Keep dogs restrained and stay a respectful distance away while enjoying this fascinating animal.

Homeowners/Campgrounds/Businesses — A bear's first response to something unusual is to flee. If a bear is feeding in an area where it doesn't belong, such as your yard, on a porch, or in a dumpster, run out at it, yell and makes lots of noise. The bear will usually leave—accompanied by its young. However, bears that have been habituated (accustomed) to human presence may ignore minor harassment. Removal of food sources and other attractants is key to deterring or avoiding bear problems.

Police Departments — Sometimes bears wander through residential areas. Usually the bear found its way into the situation and will likely find how to get out if given the chance, especially in semi-suburban and rural areas. Tell callers to leave the animal alone. If the bear is in a highly



populated area, call the Environmental Police 24-hour radio room at (800) 632-8075, or *MassWildlife* at (508) 389-6300 between 8:00 AM and 4:30 PM.

To protect the lives of people and wildlife, MassWildlife and the Environmental Police formed an interagency Large Animal Response Team (LART) to respond to situations where bear are discovered in heavily human populated areas. The team members (MassWildlife biologists and Environmental Police Officers) have specific training in chemical immobilization of large animals, primarily moose and bear. There are four options available to wildlife professionals when dealing with suburban or urban bear

situations: 1) Keep tabs on the animal from a distance and keep people well away, 2) Encourage the bear to go in a specific direction by using hazing techniques, 3) Immobilize the bear if it becomes cornered and can be confined to an area. Where practical, trained staff from MassWildlife and/or the Environmental Police will be on hand to exercise this option. 4) The last resort, when an immediate threat to public safety exists, is to destroy the bear with a firearm.

Preventing Conflicts with Bears

Do NOT Feed Bears — Keep the “wild” in “wildlife”. Bears which become accustomed to humans and dependent on human-associated foods are likely to cause property damage and become a nuisance. Sometimes it places the bear in jeopardy of being destroyed because it is no longer afraid of people.

Take down birdfeeders before April 1 and put them back up in late November or early December. In mild winters, some bears may be active year-round. Do not leave pet food outside at any time of year.

Secure Trash in Closed Containers in a Garage or Other Outbuilding —Put trash barrels out the morning of trash pick up, not the previous evening. Businesses and campgrounds in bear country should consider using bear-proof dumpsters.

Beekeepers — Use temporary or permanent electric fences to safeguard hives. Electric fences are most effective when put up before the first damage occurs.

Protect Orchards and Crops — Temporary electric fencing may be used to protect corn and other crops. Seven-strand slanted non-electric fences have been used to keep bears out of orchards. Contact local bear hunters for the early September bear season to hunt the fields.

Protect Livestock — Whenever possible, pen livestock in or near the barn at night, especially pregnant females and those with



small young. Avoid field birthing if possible. Do not leave carcasses of dead animals exposed in fields, pastures, or nearby areas. Consider the use of guard animals if you have a large or valuable livestock operation.

Bears are important and valuable mammals in Massachusetts. They are classified as big game mammals for which regulated hunting seasons and management programs have been established. If you are experiencing problems with bears or have any questions regarding them, contact your nearest *MassWildlife* District Office, listed below.

More detailed information on bears is also available on our website:

www.mass.gov/masswildlife

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Photos © by Bill Byrne



For more information contact **MassWildlife** at:

Western Wildlife District, Dalton: (413) 684-1646

Connecticut Valley Wildlife Dist., Belchertown: (413) 323-7632

Central Wildlife District, West Boylston: (508) 835-3607

Northeast Wildlife District, Ayer: (978) 772-2145

Southeast Wildlife District, Bourne: (508) 759-3406

Field Headquarters, Westborough: (508) 389-6300

MassWildlife "Balancing the needs of wildlife with the needs of people."