The Georgia Department of Natural Resources
Wildlife Resources Division

BLACK BEAR FACT SHEET



HISTORY

Prior to the 1800's, black bears (*Ursus americanus*) were common throughout Georgia. Habitat loss, unrestricted hunting, and human intolerance caused population decline. Thanks to sound wildlife management practices and its status as a game species, bears have recovered to their present healthy population of about 4,100 statewide.

RANGE AND HABITAT

Black bears occur in three distinct regions in Georgia but may range over the entire state at times in search of food or a territory of their own. Bear populations exist in the north Georgia mountains, along the Ocmulgee River drainage in central Georgia, and in/around the Okefenokee swamp in southeast Georgia. Natural range expansion also has been documented in recent years. Bears typically live in forested areas, favoring mature hardwood-pine forests that offer an abundance of natural food and younger forests that provide secure cover and a variety of fruits. In the winter, bears in Georgia use hollow tree cavities, excavated holes in the ground, brush piles, rock crevices and other places that offer protection as dens.

PHYSICAL TRAITS AND LIFE HISTORY

Wild bears usually live about 8 to 15 years. Adults may be up to 6 feet in length and about 3 feet high at the shoulder. Adult females can weigh up to 300 pounds, while adult males can weigh over 600 pounds. Females typically give birth to their first litter around 3-4 years old. Males become sexually mature around 2-3 years old but will likely not be able to breed until they are large enough to compete for breeding rights (~5-6 years old). Bears have good eyesight; however, they rely more heavily on their exceptional sense of smell. They are excellent climbers, swim well, and can run as fast as 30 miles per hour. In the fall, bears become hyperphagic, where they begin to gorge themselves on a variety of foods to prepare for winter. In Georgia, bears typically den from December to April but specific timing depends on reproductive status and food availability. Breeding season peaks in June and July, and cubs are born in the den in late January or February the following winter. Bear cubs weigh about 8 ounces when they are born in the den and are entirely dependent on the mother. Cubs stay with their mother throughout the first year and den with her the following winter before dispersing in the summer. Young females may establish their home range near their mother's, but young males are often forced to leave. Due to the extended care for their young, females typically produce a litter every other year.

DIET

Bears are omnivorous, meaning they eat a variety of foods depending on what is available at any given time of year. Their natural diet primarily consists of berries, fruits, acorns, nuts, grasses, and various types of animal matter. However, with their excellent sense of smell, bears will seek out easily accessible food left by humans. Human-provided attractants include garbage, bird and wildlife feeders, pet food, uncleaned grills, and compost piles. Apiaries, corn fields, and other agricultural crops may also attract bears. Non-natural foods are often easier for bears to obtain than natural food sources. Over time, repeated "rewards" for coming around people can cause bears to lose their natural fear of humans.

HUMAN-BEAR CONFLICT

Most human-bear conflicts can be resolved through simple actions such as removing bird feeders and outdoor pet food or storing garbage in an area unavailable to bears, such as in a garage or enclosed building. Removing attractants is the first and most critical step in resolving conflicts between people and bears. It may take several days for the bear to learn it will no longer find a free meal. Usually, the bear will move on when the food source is gone.

Trapping and relocating bears is not usually the best solution for residents or bears, because other bears may continue to cause problems if attractants are not removed. Relocated bears often try to find their way back home, making them more likely to be hit by cars or die from other causes. Moving a bear is a last resort and only warranted if a bear persists in conflict behavior after the removal of all attractants, or when major property damage has occurred or is considered likely. Bears exhibiting behaviors that threaten public safety must be euthanized.

When attractants cannot be removed, the installation of an electric fence may alleviate bear problems (e.g., bee-yards, gardens, chicken pens). When camping or hiking, food should be stored in a vehicle. If backpacking, hoist food packs high into the air and far away from the trunks of trees.

BE BEARWISE

Learn the Bearwise Basics and more at www.BearWise.org.

BearWise
www.bearwise.org