

Black Bears

Prepared by the National Wildlife Control Training Program. <http://WildlifeControlTraining.com>

Research-based, certified wildlife control training programs to solve human – wildlife conflicts.

One source for animal handling, control methods, and wildlife species information.



Figure 1. Black bear (*Ursus americanus*).
Photo by Scott E. Hygnstrom.

Species Overview

Conflicts

Black bears (*Ursus americanus*) may damage bird feeders, bee hives, and crops, as well as raid trash cans and dumps. On occasion, they will enter buildings and vehicles in search of food. If a bear has entered a structure, immediately contact your local police agency. Black bears may travel many miles in early summer seeking food and prior to breeding season. They may end up in suburban areas such as parks and school yards. If a bear is treed in an urban area, keep people and pets away,

and let the bear leave on its own, if possible. Darting and translocation of a bear is high risk for both the bear and agency staff.

Legal Status

Black bear in South Carolina may be hunted during specified seasons in Game zone 1, (special permits are required) and by computerized drawing for the Coastal bear population in designated counties only.

Nuisance bears should be reported directly to the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (SCDNR). See www.dnr.sc.gov for further rules and regulations.

Identification

Black bears (Figure 1) are the smallest and most widely distributed of the three species of bears in North America. They are the only species of bear in the Southeast. Bears are massive, strong animals.

Physical Description

Black bears that live east of the Mississippi River are predominantly black, and some may have a light blaze on their chest. In the Rocky Mountains and westward, shades of brown, cinnamon, and blonde are common. The head is moderately sized with a straight profile and tapering nose. The ears are relatively small,

rounded, and erect. The tail is short (3 to 6 inches) and inconspicuous. Each foot has five curved claws, about 1 inch long, that do not retract. Bears walk with a shuffling gait but can be quite agile and quick.

Health and Safety Concerns

Bears suffer from a variety of internal and external parasites, some of which may be transmitted to humans. Zoonotic diseases include the worm responsible for trichinellosis, and the protozoan that causes toxoplasmosis.

Although black bears generally avoid humans, they have attacked people. However, encounters are rarely fatal. Always respect bears and keep a safe distance. If a bear starts to approach, shout and wave your arms to try to scare the animal.

General Biology, Reproduction, and Behavior

Reproduction

Black bears become sexually mature at about 3½ years of age, but some females may not breed until their fourth year or later. Black bears breed during the summer, usually in late June or early July.

Females in good condition usually produce two or three cubs that weigh 7 to 12 ounces at birth. Bears in urban areas with subsidized food have had up to five cubs in a single litter.

Females give birth between late December and early February while in their dens. Only females care for young. Males sometimes kill and eat cubs.

Cubs are weaned in late summer, but usually stay close to their mother throughout their first

year. After the breeding season, females and their yearlings may travel together for a few weeks.

Nesting/Denning Cover

Sites for dens are quite variable and include piles of rocks or brush, excavations, hollow trees, and structures made by humans. The den floor may be covered with grass and leaves, or left bare. Many dens are at ground level under fallen trees, or sometimes even decks.

Behavior

Black bears typically are nocturnal, although occasionally they are active during the day. In the South, black bears tend to be active year-round.

The home range of a black bear depends on the type and quality of habitat, and the sex and age of the bear. In mountainous regions, bears encounter a variety of habitats by moving up or down in elevation. Where the terrain is flat, bears typically range more widely in search of resources. Most adult females have well-defined home ranges of 5 to 20 square miles. Ranges of adult males are several times larger.

Habitat

Black bears frequent heavily forested areas, including large swamps and mountainous regions.

Food Habits

Black bears are omnivorous and forage on a wide variety of plants and animals.



Figure 2. Black bear feeding on trash. Image provided by Gary R. Goff.

Their diet typically is determined by the seasonal availability of food. About 80% of their diet is plant material, and typical foods include grasses, berries, nuts, tubers, inner bark, insects, small mammals, eggs, carrion, and garbage (Figure 2).

Voice, Sounds, Tracks, and Signs

Bears normally are silent when traveling. They emit grunts with young, and may blow and click their teeth if they are upset. Females use loud, staggered grunts to threaten unwanted males. Bears utter moans when subordinate to others.

Damage Identification

Damage to Landscapes

Bears can cause extensive damage to trees, especially in second-growth forests, by feeding on the inner bark, or clawing the bark to leave territorial markings. Black bears damage orchards by breaking trees and branches in attempts to reach fruit. They often will return to an orchard nightly. Due to repeated damage to orchards, and trees with broken limbs, losses often are economically significant.

Damage to Crops and Livestock

Black bears damage field crops such as corn, and occasionally alfalfa or oats. Large, localized areas of broken, smashed stalks show where bears have fed in cornfields. Bears eat the entire cob, whereas raccoons strip the ears from the stalks and chew the kernels from the ears. Black bears prefer corn in the milk stage.

Black bears destroy beehives (Figure 3). Damage to beehives includes broken and scattered combs and hives, with claw and tooth marks. Hair, tracks, scat, and other sign may be found in the immediate area. A bear usually will use the same path to return every night until all of the brood, comb, and honey are eaten.



Figure 3. Beehives damaged by a bear. Photo by Paul D. Curtis.

Damage to Structures

Black bears can damage homes and vehicles when searching for food. Black bears also will scavenge in garbage cans, break in and demolish the interiors of cabins, damage bird feeders, and raid campsites and food caches.

Damage Prevention and Control Methods

Habitat Modification

Prevention is the best approach to handling damage by black bears. Sanitation and proper

management of garbage are essential. Store food, organic waste, and other attractants in bear-proof containers. Use garbage cans for nonfood items only, and place food waste in bear-proof garbage receptacles (Figure 4). Pick up garbage regularly, and place garbage at the curb the morning of pick up rather than the night before. Reduce access to landfills through fencing, and bury refuse daily.

Eliminate garbage and carcass dumps. Surround dumpsters with electric fences. Only feed birds during winter, when bears are denning. Plant crops (e.g., corn, oats, fruit) away from forest edges if possible. Pick and remove all dropped fruit from orchards.



Figure 4. Bear-proof trash can. Photo by Stephen M. Vantassel.

Prohibit all feeding of bears. If possible, locate campgrounds, campsites, and hiking trails in areas that are not frequented by bears. If feasible, clear hiking trails to provide a minimum viewing distance of 50 yards down the trail. Avoid bear feeding and denning areas.

Black bears can tear open doors, rip holes in siding, and break glass windows to gain access to food stored inside cabins, tents, and other structures. Use solid frame construction, $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch plywood sheeting, and strong, tight-fitting shutters and doors. Steel plating is more impervious than wood.

Place beehives on a flat or low-sloping garage roof. Add extra roof braces as two hives full of honey can weigh 800 pounds or more. Another technique is to place hives on an 8- X 40-foot flatbed trailer, and surround it with a 3-strand electric fence. Although expensive, this method makes hives less vulnerable to bear damage and makes moving them very easy.

In South Carolina, it is illegal to entice bears by any means. The law states that you must take away the attractants when bears are coming to your yard.

Exclusion

Confine livestock in buildings and pens at night, especially during lambing or calving seasons. Remove and dispose of carcasses by deep burial. Place livestock pens and beehives away from wooded areas or protective cover, and surround them with electric fences.

Fences have proven effective in deterring bears from landfills, apiaries, cabins, and other high-value properties. Fences, however, may be relatively expensive. Consider the extent, duration, and cost of damage. Many fence designs have been used with varying degrees of success. Electric chargers increase the effectiveness of fences.

Frightening Devices

Habituated bears that are conditioned to food can be very dangerous. Do not use any frightening method that would threaten a bear and elicit an attack. If a frightening technique does not cause the bear to flee in a few seconds, stop and try a different method.

Black bears can be frightened for short periods from an area such as a building or livestock corral by use of night-lights, strobe lights, loud

music, pyrotechnics, exploder canons, scarecrows, and trained guard dogs. Change the position of frightening devices frequently. Individual bears usually become habituated to them, at which point frightening devices are ineffective, and human safety becomes a concern.

Aversive conditioning requires unpleasant experiences to encourage bears to stop nuisance behaviors such as visiting landfills or getting close to urban areas. Hazing is most successful when used on bears before they become conditioned to food provided by humans. Tactics include chasing accompanied by yelling, throwing rocks, cracker shells, pepper spray, 12-gauge plastic slugs, gel-filled paint balls, bean bags, or 38-mm rubber bullets.

Repellents

Capsaicin spray has been tested and used effectively on black bears in close quarters and threatening encounters. The range for most products is less than 30 feet, so capsaicin is only effective in close encounters. Do not spray capsaicin on objects or in areas in an attempt to repel bears, as the spray actually may attract them. When using capsaicin spray, make sure that you are upwind of the target so that you do not suffer from the effects.

Toxicants

No toxicants are registered.

Shooting

As last resort, shooting is effective for dealing with a black bear that poses an immediate threat to safety. Specified hunting seasons and required permits for bear hunting in South Carolina are listed online. See www.dnr.sc.gov.

Nuisance bear should be reported directly to your closest SCDNR field office.

Trapping

Several traps are available for capturing bears. Due to the legal and technical issues involved with nuisance bear, trapping should only be used when necessary and implemented by professionals.

Disposition

Relocation

Relocation of black bears is not recommended.

Translocation

Euthanasia

Translocation of black bears is not recommended.

If necessary, bears should be euthanized by shooting or chemical induction.

Resources

<http://intranet.dnr.sc.gov>

<http://wildlifecontroltraining.com>

<http://icwdm.org/>

<http://wildlifecontrol.info>

Prepared by the National Wildlife Control Training Program. WildlifeControlTraining.com

Certified wildlife control training programs to solve human – wildlife conflicts. The only research-based source for training, animal handling and control methods, and wildlife species information.