

Black Bears: Basic Biology

American black bear (*Ursus americanus*)



- The smallest of the three bear species in North America, black bears are the only bear species found in Vermont.
- The State's 4500-6000 bears are concentrated along the spine of the Green Mountains and the northeast, but they're also found in forested regions of the Upper Valley.
- In Vermont, males average 300-400 pounds, but females weigh only 120-180 pounds.
- They're very dexterous and can open screw-top jars and door latches.
- Females become mature between 3 and 5 years old and then reproduce about every other year, giving birth to 1 to 5 cubs (average 2 cubs).
- Youngsters stay with their mother for about 16 months, but otherwise they're generally considered to be solitary.

HIBERNATION OR DENNING

- They are active throughout the daylight hours, especially at dawn and dusk, although they're likely to also be active at night during the breeding season.
- During cold winter months when food is scarce, black bears enter dens to sleep and conserve energy.
- While denning, they can survive for months without eating, drinking, urinating or defecating.
- Their heart rate and basal metabolic rate decline, but body temperature stays near normal, unlike deep hibernation.
- Because they aren't in deep hibernation, they can wake more easily if disturbed or during warm spells.
- With climate change bringing warmer winters, bears may become more likely to be out and about throughout the year.
- Cubs, each weighing only about a half pound, are born in late January or early February during denning, which keeps them safe and gives them time to grow before emerging in spring.

WHAT DO BEARS EAT?

- Black bears are found mostly in forests that have a mixture of conifers, hardwoods, wetlands and variation in terrain.
- Although black bears are members of the order Carnivora, their actual diet is omnivorous.
- Black bears in Vermont eat mostly berries, cherries, beechnuts, acorns, grasses and tubers, as well as insects and their larvae; in spring they may even prey on newborn fawns.
- However, bears living near humans can become attracted to other foods such as birdseed, garbage, compost and pet food.
- They may also be attracted to berries and to fruit that falls to the ground, such as from apple and cherry trees growing around homes.
- Although their eyesight isn't very keen, they have excellent hearing and sense of smell, which can guide them to food near your home.



SO BEARS ARE ATTRACTED TO:

- Bird feeders
- Garbage
- Compost
- BBQ grills
- Bee hives
- Chicken coops
- Pet food
- Fruit trees & berry vines