



MassWildlife

Living With Wildlife

The Black Bear in Massachusetts



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 30 years. They are common in western Massachusetts, moderately common in the central region, and rarely found in eastern counties.

Description: Black bears are black overall with a brown muzzle and sometimes a white chest patch. Their feet are large and well padded, with moderately-sized curved claws. Male black bears generally range in weight from 130 to 600 lbs. and females from 100 to 400. In Massachusetts, males average 230 lbs. and females 140. Lengths range from 3¹/₂ to 6 feet and shoulder height from 2¹/₂ to 3¹/₂ feet.

Life History: Black bears have good eyesight, hearing and an extraordinary sense of smell which is used to locate food and 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 which remains free-floating in the uterus and 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. Litter sizes are usually 2 or 3. 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 daytime during spring and fall, but are more active during dawn and dusk hours in 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 leftover nuts in hardwood areas. In summer, emerging berry crops are preferred. Corn fields and oak, beech, or hickory stands are favored in fall. They also eat grubs, insects, feed on carrion (dead animals) and occasionally prey on young deer. Bears are also known to visit birdfeeders, cornfields, orchards and beehives. Bears have good long-term memory and can remember the location of food sources years after the first visit.

Adult females bears use home ranges averaging 9 to 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 a jumble of rocks, or in a mountain laurel thicket. 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

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Hikers, Hunters, Wildlife Viewers and Other Outdoor Users — Despite popular belief, black bears are 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 your yard, on a porch or in a dumpster, run out at it, yell and makes lots of noise. The bear will leave—accompanied by its young.

Police Departments — Sometimes bears wander through residential areas. Never try to approach or pursue a bear if one should show up. Usually the bear found its way into the situation and will likely find its way 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 (1-800-632-8075) or MassWildlife. 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 4 options available to wildlife professionals when dealing with suburban or urban bear situations. 1) Keeping tabs on the animal from a distance, or "baby-sitting" as it is sometimes called. 2) Encouraging the bear to go in a specific direction by using hazing techniques. 3) Immobilizing 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 put them back up in late November or early December. Do not leave pet food outside.

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.

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 to for the early September bear season to hunt the fields.

Protect Livestock — When possible, pen livestock in or near the barn at night, especially pregnant females or 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. More detailed information on bears is also available on our website: www.mass.gov/masswildlife.

(8/05)



For more information contact **MassWildlife** at:

Western Wildlife District, Pittsfield: (413) 447-9789

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

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

Northeast Wildlife District, Acton: (978) 263-4347

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

or visit our website at www.masswildlife.org

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