

Black bear

Ursus americanus

By Jim Pashby

In Montana, grizzly bears get so much attention—state mammal, federal oversight, mascot for the 2023 national champion runnerup NCAA Division I football team—that a person could forget about the griz’s far more numerous and equally fascinating cousin, the black bear.

IDENTIFICATION

Black bears are Montana’s second-largest carnivore (though technically they are omnivores, eating other foods in addition to meat). As the name implies, most are black, usually with a tan muzzle. But they can also be blond, cinnamon, or brown like a grizzly.

Black bears have a slight shoulder hump, but not nearly as big as a grizzly’s, and when black bears walk on level ground, their butt sits higher than the rest of their body.

The muzzle is straight in profile, compared to the grizzly’s slightly concave snout. The ears are longer and more pointed than a grizzly’s short, rounded ears. Males weigh 170 to 480 pounds, and females 130 to 300 pounds.

REPRODUCTION

Females first breed at age 2½ or 3½, though in poor habitat they may not have their first young until age 6½. Breeding occurs in early summer, and the female has her one or two cubs while hibernating in winter.

HABITAT

Like coyotes, black bears can do well just about anywhere in Montana, from high mountains to prairie river bottoms. They especially like dense forests and are most abundant in northwestern Montana, though their range extends east across the state’s entire southern half. Black bears often follow stream bottoms into towns like Bozeman and Missoula, where they sometimes come dangerously close to people. The bears are lured by the smell of unsecured fruit

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SCIENTIFIC NAME

Ursus is Latin for “bear,” and *americanus* refers to the Americas, where the species lives.

trees, garbage, dog food, chicken coops, bird feed, and barbecue grill grease.

FOOD

In addition to human-related foods noted above, black bears will eat about anything nature offers. The omnivores dine on grasses, sedges, berries, fruits, nuts, the inner bark of trees, insects, honey, eggs, carrion, rodents, and the occasional deer or elk fawn.

MANAGEMENT

With a state population of roughly 13,000 (compared to about 1,500 grizzly bears), black bears are thriving in Montana. There are enough to allow managed spring and fall hunting seasons, which result in a

yearly harvest of about 1,000. FWP biologists have done extensive research on black bears and found that even with hunting, the population is doing well throughout the species’ range. A new study is looking more closely at populations in different regions of the state.

As with grizzly bears, conflicts between black bears and people are increasing each year as more homes are built in bear habitat. A top priority for FWP is to reduce conflicts so that people aren’t injured by bears and bears don’t have to be killed to protect human safety. The main way FWP staff do that is by convincing people to keep their garbage and other outdoor food attractants secured so bears can’t get to them. 🐻