



# AMERICAN BLACK BEAR

CARNIVORA

Family: Ursidae

Genus: *Ursus*

Species: *americanus*



**Range:** throughout North America, from Canada to Mexico and in at least 40 U.S. states

**Habitat:** typically live in largely forested areas, but do leave forests in search of food.

**Niche:** Terrestrial, omnivorous, cathemeral

**Wild diet:** Variety of plants, fruits, nuts, insects, honey, salmon, small mammals and carrion, 85% of the black bear's diet consists of vegetation, opportunistic omnivores

**Zoo diet:** Fruit & vegetables, fish and horsemeat, kibbles, bread & vitamin supplements

**Life Span:** (Wild) ~25 years, (Captive)

**Sexual dimorphism:** Females tend to have more slender and pointed faces than males; females weigh 30% less than males

**Location in SF Zoo:** Bear grotto across from Terrace Cafe

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## APPEARANCE & PHYSICAL ADAPTATIONS:

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The American black bear is the continent's smallest and most widely distributed bear species. Black bear fur is usually a uniform color except for a brown muzzle and light markings that sometimes appear on their chests; their coloring can be blue-gray or blue-black, brown, cinnamon, and occasionally white. The fur is soft, with dense underfur and long, coarse, thick guard hairs. Black bears have short, non-retractable claws that give them an excellent tree-climbing ability. They climb trees regularly to feed, escape enemies and to hibernate. Black bears have a straight or slightly convex facial profile, an excellent sense of smell with well-developed turbinate bones and relatively small eyes, with a nictitating membrane. They are excellent and strong swimmers.

**Weight: M-** 130 – 500 lbs

**F-** 90 – 330 lbs

**Body Length:** 4 – 7 feet

**Shoulder height:** 2 – 3 feet

**Vestigial tail:** 4.8 in

Dentition: I 3/3 – C 1/1 – PM 4/4 – M 2/3 x 2 = 42. The teeth consist of flattened molars and piercing canines for its omnivorous diet. Incisors are not specialized.

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## STATUS & CONSERVATION

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The American black bear is listed as Least Concern on the IUCN Red List, due to its widespread distribution and a large global population estimated to be twice that of all other bear species combined. Historically, black bears occupied the majority of North America's forested regions. Their current distribution is restricted to relatively undisturbed forested regions. A growing concern is the poaching of bears for their paws and gall bladders, which may be sold commercially. Those products, particularly bile from gall bladders, are highly valued by practitioners of Traditional Chinese Medicine. Several U.S. states and Canadian provinces allow the sale of bear parts taken legally by hunters.

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## COMMUNICATION AND OTHER BEHAVIOR

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Black bears tend to be solitary animals, with the exception of mothers and cubs. The bears usually forage alone, but will tolerate each other and forage in groups if there is an abundance of food in one area. American black bears tend to be territorial and non-gregarious in nature. They often mark trees using their teeth and claws as a form of communication.

Most black bears den up depending on local weather conditions and availability of food during the winter months; they remain in their den up to 7 ½ months without eating, drinking, urinating, or defecating; they decrease their body temperature and metabolism. In regions where there is a consistent food supply and warmer weather throughout the winter, bears may not den up or do so for a very brief time. Females give birth and usually remain denned throughout the winter, but males and females without young may leave their dens from time to time during winter months.

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## COURTSHIP AND YOUNG

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Breeding usually occurs June–July. Both sexes are promiscuous. The fertilized eggs undergo delayed development and do not implant in the female's womb until November. Cubs are born in late January to early February; cubs are altricial; eyes open after 28–40 days; walking begins at 5 weeks; cubs reach independence at 16–18 months.

Cubs remain with the mother for a year and a half or more, even though they are weaned at 6-8 months of age. Black bear females typically produce cubs every two years once they become mature. The 2-year reproductive cycle is genetically timed to fit the annual cycle of plant growth and fruiting of the region. Should the young die for some reason, the female may reproduce again after only one year.

Estrous Period:	Sexual Maturity: 4 – 5 years
Gestation: 63-70 days, (235 days with delayed implantation)	Weaning Age: 6 – 8 mos
# of Mammas: 3 pairs	Length at birth: 8.1 in
# of Young: ~ 2 - 3	Weight at birth: 0.62 – 0.99 lbs

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## MISCELLANEOUS

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American black bears are not closely related to the other North American Bears, the brown bears and polar bears; genetic studies reveal that they split from a common ancestor 5.05 mya. American and Asian black bears are considered sister taxa, and are more closely related to each other than to other species of bear.

American black bears can be distinguished from brown bears (includes grizzlies) by their smaller size, their less concave skull profiles, their shorter claws and the lack of a shoulder hump.

### Sources:

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