

Boundary Waters Bears

by Lynn Rogers

The BWCA has relatively low fertility and, consequently, only a few kinds of bear foods. The low number of foods makes crop failures of any of them especially important to the bears. Hazelnut and berry crop failures are common due to late frosts or drought, as happened in 1985. Drought is a special problem there because of the shallow, easily desiccated soil that overlays the rock outcrops. In years of natural food scarcity, the bears are almost as quick as chipmunks to overcome their fear of us and seek our food. This article gives some background on the black bear, the only kind of bear found in the BWCA.

Across North America, the black bear is the bear most likely to come in contact with man because it is numerous, widespread, and it likes our food. However, attacks by black bears in campgrounds are surprisingly rare considering the amount of contact we have with them. In the BWCA, during an 18-year study of bear-human interactions, there were 18,000,000 visitor-days without a single attack, although some people became frightened when they encountered bluffing bears that wanted their food.

The few black bear attacks across other parts of North America have been mainly by males rather than by mothers with cubs. The idea that black bear mothers are likely to attack probably is based on the rare but well publicized attacks that have occurred, the bluffing charges that they sometimes make, and the fact that grizzly mothers are so likely to attack in defense of cubs. Grizzlies live in brushy, fairly open country while black bears live in the forest where escape into trees is easier. So there has been less natural selection for defense of cubs in the black bear. Researchers in northern Minnesota commonly chase black bear family groups in order to tree the cubs and ear tag them. As of yet, mothers have done no more than bluff, even when cubs scream "Maaa" with almost human voices. More caution would be needed when dealing with grizzly families.

In many cases, black bears simply retreat quietly into cover before people even are aware that one is near. They have hearing more sensitive than man's and broad, soft foot pads for moving quietly downwind to identify the source of any unusual sounds. They can also run faster than 25 m.p.h.

The uncanny sense of smell of the black bear serves not only as an early warning system but also as a means for locating patches of food. It also helps bears determine which logs hold the ants and other insects that are their most reliable sources of fat and protein. The search for food is further aided by acute vision at close range. Black bears can even see in color. Distance vision has not yet been adequately tested for black bears.

The speed, strength, sharp claws and large canine teeth of black bears give them the appearance of able predators. However, they obtain very little of their food by killing other mammals. Instead, they use their teeth and claws for ripping apart insect-ridden logs, tearing apart carrion, and defending themselves against other bears. The claws of the black bears are sharp and tightly curved for easy tree-climbing. Consequently, black bears have an advantage over grizzlies, deer, and wild hogs when competing for delicacies such as acorns, nuts, catkins, and fruits. The black bear holds digging to a minimum, usually limiting such work to digging dens and digging out ant hills and hornet nests. In fall, though, an occasional black bear will turn over as much as a half acre of dirt to get the nutrients stored in the tuberous roots of certain plants.

In Minnesota, grass, buds, ants, catkins, and young leaves are staples in spring until berries ripen. Then fruits become mainstays until they are destroyed by autumn frosts. Many of the fruits that bears eat grow most abundantly in and around forest openings, and bears can be found there on cool, overcast, and rainy days. But on hot, clear days black bears spend much of their time in the shade and may even enter the water to cool off.

In fall, in the hardwoods portion of the bear range of North America, acorns, beechnuts, hickory nuts, hazelnuts, apples, and other fruits are important foods. However, in the coniferous northern portion of the range, fruit and mast-producing trees are scarce, so black bears in the north turn to green vegetation after the berries are gone. However, bears are as poorly adapted as we are for digesting cellulose, and they often lose weight on a diet of greens; so bears that must subsist on vegetation usually retire to dens weeks earlier than bears that have good sources of food on which to fatten in the fall.

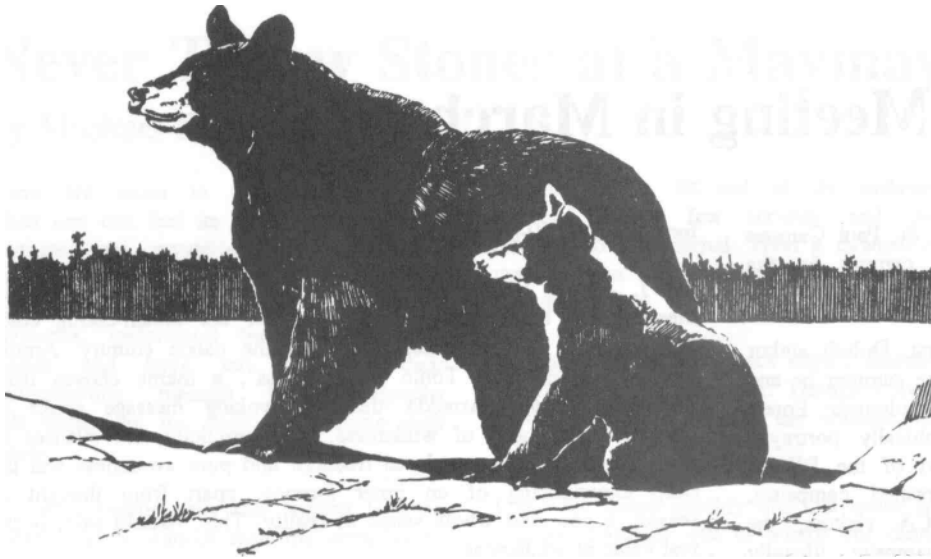
In the north, black bears are in dens from five to seven months each year, depending in part on local food supplies. In the south where food is available much of the year, bears den for only short periods or not at all.

Black bears usually construct their dens with entrances just large enough for them to squeeze through. Then they rake leaves, grass, and twigs into the dens for insulative beds and lie curled up with their thickly furred backs protecting them from the sub-freezing and sub-zero temperatures that penetrate the dens. Each bear sleeps alone except for mothers with cubs.

During hibernation, body temperatures of bears drop only a little (usually to between 88 and 98 degrees F. from a summer temperature of 100-101 degrees F.) but metabolic rate drops nearly in half, respiration slows to only one breath every 45 seconds or so, kidney function drops, and heart rate occasionally falls to as low as eight beats per minute. Some bears go the whole denning period without urinating, but this is more common in captivity than in the wild.

There are several misconceptions regarding the denning habits of bears. One is that bears eat a lot of roughage in the fall to purge the digestive tract and form a fecal plug that puts an end to feeding for the year. It is true that bears do ingest, perhaps accidentally, small amounts of material that they rake into their dens for beds, and it is true that bears have feces in their bowels during the winter. However, those feces form whether the bear eats roughage or nothing at all because it is formed primarily from products of the bear's own body. This is not a mysterious process. Bears apparently form feces during denning in the same way that people do during starvation. Such feces are formed from cells that slough off the inside of the digestive tract and from intestinal bacteria. Bears that den for several months usually defecate at least once during the denning period and defecate large quantities upon leaving their dens in spring.

A misconception that was prevalent among primitive people and believed by many people even today is that bears get sustenance during hibernation by sucking their paws. This idea probably arose from observations of bears licking the bottoms of their feet during the last half of the denning period when the old, calloused foot pads drop off. The soft, newly uncovered pads apparently are tender and receive quite a bit of attention.



The denning period is the time when bears give birth. Cubs usually are born in late January after a gestation period of seven months. They are conceived in June or July, but development of the embryos is limited almost entirely to the last three months of gestation. Before that time, the fertilized egg is not implanted in the uterus and is barely visible without a microscope. Consequently, it is difficult to determine whether females killed in fall hunting seasons are pregnant.

Litters are usually one to four cubs. Three is common in much of the East, and two is most common in much of the West. At birth, cubs usually weigh less than a pound and are almost naked, but by the time they toddle out of their dens with their mothers at about three months of age, they weigh between four and seven pounds. They cannot yet run well enough to escape fleet-footed predators at that age, but they can easily climb trees with their already well-developed claws.

Even while cubs are in their dens they receive the best of care. Their mothers clean up (i.e. eat) the feces of their cubs and move into positions that make nursing easy, moving in a way that reminds one of a person doing something in his sleep. In Minnesota, mothers nurse their newborn cubs in dens for up to three months without venturing out for food or water. As a result, lactating mothers lose a third or more of their body weight during hibernation whereas other bears usually lose only 15-25 percent.

Black bear cubs suckle through the June-July mating season and prevent their mothers from coming into heat. Consequently litters usually do not overlap, and mothers devote their energy to only one litter at a time. Nursing mothers seem almost human at times; one picture that sticks vividly in my mind is of a mother sitting with her back against a tree cradling her cubs in her arms and licking heads of the cubs nursing at her chest.

Cubs den with their mother their first winter and even help rake bedding material into the den. However, mothers may remove the bedding and rearrange it to their own liking. Cubs that are orphaned instinctively build dens by themselves and are able to survive to adulthood.

Cubs normally separate from their mothers in June

of their second year. Young females usually then settle near their birthplaces and at three to eight years of age begin producing cubs. They continue to reproduce at two to four, year intervals past 20 years of age. There is no known menopause in the black bear. The age at which females begin to reproduce and the amount of time between litters depend upon food supply.

Males leave their birthplaces before mating and often travel more than 100 miles before settling, but once settled they usually use the same five to ten mile diameter area for mating each year.

Males are aggressive toward each other during the June-July mating period, and encounters lead to threats, chasing, or savage battles. The scarred hides of old males are evidence of the violent contests that are fought near receptive females. (Both males and females are promiscuous.) Rival males broadcast their whereabouts to one another through the use of "bear trees" on which they scratch, bite, and rub their scent. (Female black bears seldom use "bear trees".) Messages probably reveal which males are in the area and how safe it might be to remain there. Messages tend to be ignored, however, by males on the trail of females in heat.

After the mating season, male hormone levels drop, and aggression declines. In Minnesota, mature males travel up to 125 miles outside their breeding ranges in late summer and fall and congregate at garbage dumps or other food sources. Some females also travel far outside their territories at that time, but are less apt to go to garbage dumps. Both sexes return to their mating areas to den.

Deaths during the denning period are surprisingly infrequent. Starvation usually occurs only after bears leave their dens, and predators seldom attempt to kill bears in the confines of a den. A large bear killed a mother and yearling cubs in a den in Michigan, however, and a pack of timber wolves killed a mother and newborn cubs at a den in Minnesota.

Starvation deaths are uncommon among adults.

However, 38% of 13 yearlings starved in Minnesota after drought and frost reduced natural foods several years in succession. Most mortality among cubs and yearlings is from natural causes, but more than 90% of the deaths of adults is from human-related causes, mainly gunshot. As a result very few wild bears live the 30 or more years that bears sometimes do in captivity.

Except for the occasional outsized individual, adult male bears weigh between 150 and 550 pounds and adult females weigh between 90 and 300 pounds. The term "big old sow" arises because large males sometimes are mistaken for females in late fall when their testicles are retracted into their abdomens and their scrotums are shrunk and obscured in abdominal fur. Testicles become scrotal again in early spring.

Black bears are presently found in good numbers in the BWCA and would seem to have a bright future as long as the BWCA is protected. But even in wilderness areas, bears can be adversely affected by the increasing number of recreationists. Minimum impact camping methods in the BWCA (including packing out unburnable refuse and keeping food out of reach of bears) tend to minimize the impact of people on bears. By making our food unavailable to bears, we insulate bears from the effects of our presence, help prevent needless relocations or nuisance kills, and aid in the perpetuation of black bears in the Boundary Waters.

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