

# The Black Bear

by Joe Clark



## General Description

The black bear (*Ursus americanus*) is the smallest of the three North American bear species, the other two being the grizzly and polar bears.

The weights of black bears vary considerably. Adult females seldom reach 300 pounds, but males weighing over 700 pounds have been recorded. Bears in Arkansas are heavier than most. Males seven years of age or older usually exceed 400 pounds.

Black is the predominant color of black bears in the eastern U.S., but brown or "cinnamon" is more common in the West. In both instances, the breast may have a patch of white on it.

Bears have poor eyesight but have an extraordinary sense of smell and are one of Arkansas' most intelligent mammals.

## Distribution and Habitat

The black bear was once one of the most widely distributed mammals in North America, but today it's absent from many interior regions of the continent. Bears were extirpated in western Arkansas but successfully reintroduced in the 1950s and '60s.

Black bear habitat requirements are quite varied. They need suitable denning sites, plenty of escape cover and a liberal supply of high quality foods. Contrary to what was once thought, bears can survive surprisingly well around humans.

## Habits

Winter denning is a fascinating aspect of bear biology. When black bears den, their heart and respiration rates decrease markedly. But unlike true hibernators, body temperature doesn't decrease drastically. This enables bears to rouse quickly from their winter sleep and occasionally make short ventures from dens on warm winter days. Arkansas bears begin searching for dens in early October, and most have denned by late December. Bears den in rock

crevices, excavated burrows and cavities in standing trees. Tree cavity dens may be as high as 60 feet.

Little food is available after bears emerge from their dens in spring. They lose weight during this period until later in the summer when blackberries, pokeberries and blueberries ripen. During autumn, bears feed heavily on fat-rich acorns and hickory nuts and commonly gain 100 pounds or more during this short time. This extra fat readies them for the rigors of winter denning. Consequently, acorn and other nut crops are vital to bears.

### **Reproduction**

Bears breed during summer months, and males cover large areas searching for females. Bears are promiscuous, meaning both males and females may mate with different individuals. Young are born in the winter den. Bear cubs are relatively undeveloped and small at birth, being only about eight inches in length. Two is the average litter size, but three are more common than one.

Mother and cubs emerge from the den by mid-May, and the cubs begin learning about life in the wild. These cubs

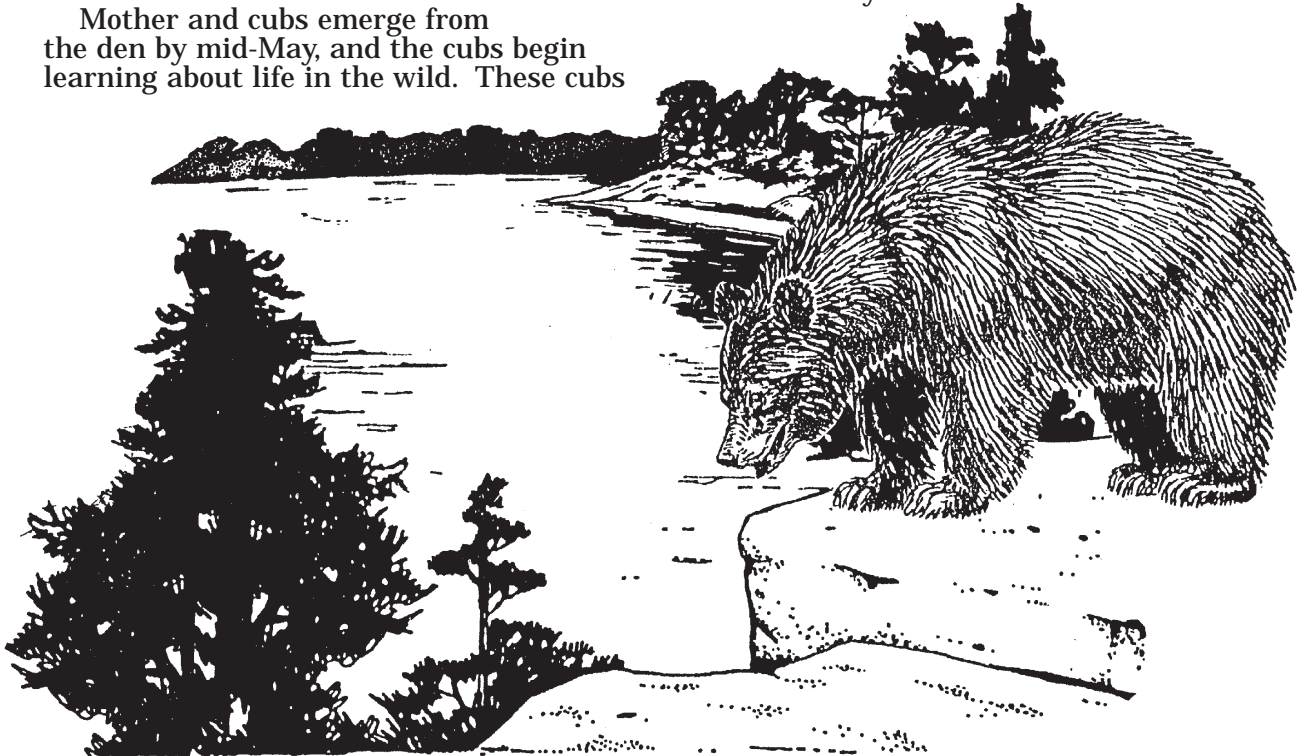
will again den with their mother the following winter and stay with her until the next summer when she finally drives them away. Females produce a litter of cubs only once every two years because of the care the young require.

### **Importance**

Bears are a controversial species. Some people view them as a valuable natural resource, while others scorn them as a nuisance and threat. Bears are considered the ultimate symbol of wilderness, and their presence evokes feelings of reverence and awe in many.

Bears are hunted for food and recreation in Arkansas and elsewhere in North America. Bear hunting seasons are a big event in some states, adding important revenue to local economies.

Unfortunately, these intelligent animals sometimes learn to raid garbage sites, gain access to buildings where feed is stored, kill livestock or destroy bee hives. The Arkansas Game & Fish Commission assists landowners by reloca-



ing problem bears.

Bears are also important to medical science. Their ability to hold urine while denning, without any ill effects, has spurred medical research with the possibility it might lead to a better understanding of how to treat human kidney disease.

### **Management**

Bears are elusive, secretive animals, and basic data are difficult and expensive to obtain. This causes wildlife managers to use population monitoring techniques that are less accurate but cost efficient and applicable over large areas. One such method used in Arkansas is the

bait-station survey. This method entails hanging sardine baits in trees along predetermined routes through bear country. A week later the routes are checked for visits by bears. Evidence of visits includes claw marks on tree trunks or tooth marks in the sardine cans. This provides information on changes in population levels.

The outlook for Arkansas's black bears is bright. Bears have been restored and are increasing in many parts of the state. With proper management, the bear population in Arkansas has the potential to someday sustain harvests many times the current level.



### **Arkansas Game & Fish Commission**

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