



# Black Bears

## Black Bear Facts

- Up to 90 percent of a bear's diet is made up of fruits, berries, twigs and grasses. The rest is typically made up of insects. Bears usually have very little meat in their diets.
- A female black bear (sow) may have a litter of one to five cubs. The average litter size in Arkansas is two or three cubs.
- Black bears usually mate every other year and are 3 or 4 years old before they mate.
- A sow's gestation period is seven months. The blastocyst (a tiny ball of cells that becomes an embryo) does not "attach" until November and cubs are born in January.
- Cubs usually stay with their mothers until spring of their second year.
- Black bears search for dens in November and December in Arkansas.
- Arkansas black bears do not truly hibernate, although they go into a deep sleep during part of winter.



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## In Arkansas

The black bear is a true Arkansan. So many of them roamed the Arkansas frontier in the middle of the 19th century that Arkansas was known as The Bear State. Thomas Bangs Thorpe's larger-than-life short story, "The Big Bear of Arkansas," and a strong trade in bear oil gave credence to the nickname.

Native bears were a resource – and a nuisance – for pioneers. It's hard to believe that black bears were almost wiped out by hunting and habitat loss during the first half of the 20th century. By 1950, the population had been chopped and scattered to the wilds of White River bottomland, with very few if any remaining in the Ozark and Ouachita mountains.

## The Comeback

The Arkansas Game and Fish Commission created a plan to regenerate the state's population. Between 1958 and 1968, 254 black bears from Minnesota, Wisconsin and Canada were released in Arkansas, most of them in the Ozark and Ouachita national forests. The population grew to the point that a hunting season began in 1980. Biologists estimate about 4,000 bears now live in the state.

## Dinner Invitation

Some black bears wander into places where people live – especially when they're looking for food. A bear has an incredible sense of smell that can lead it to garbage and other things it shouldn't eat. These situations aren't healthy for bears and aren't safe for people.

Sometimes these wondering bears must be trapped or sedated and moved to suitable habitat. They usually don't cause problems but

they can become nuisances, especially if they get used to eating what people feed them. That's why bear biologists warn people that bears shouldn't be fed. It's also why bear-proof trash containers have become common in parks, forests and other public areas.

Bears are drawn to food odors, so don't cook near a tent and don't store food in a tent. Hang food (and anything else with a strong odor) at least 10 feet off the ground and 6 feet from a tree or limb. Don't scatter food scraps at a campsite and pack out all trash. If a bear approaches and no safe place is available, wave your arms, make noise and throw rocks to frighten it.

## Keeping Track

Biologists in Arkansas and other states use radio collars to keep up with a few female bears every year. The radio signal allows biologists to track the bears to their dens. Biologists usually visit the dens in late winter after cubs have been born. They take measurements and gather other information to help them understand and follow the bear population.

## Big Game

A black bear is a great trophy for hunters, although bears don't have a reputation as great wild game for the table. But with a little care in the field, black bear meat can be tasty.

The key is in a bear's fat layer, which is oily and has a short shelf life, especially in warm weather. The good news is the fat is relatively easy to remove. Hunters should have help handy if they plan to take a bear, which can weigh 200-400 pounds in Arkansas. Time is critical.



It's OK to skin (stretch the hide and keep it cool) and quarter a bear in the field if moving it is too tough. Cut the hind and front quarters loose – cut out the backstrap, inner loins and neck meat to pack out in pieces.

Avoid rolling the hide and freezing it because the inside will stay warm for hours. Instead, cool it while it's flat, then roll it before it freezes.