

# What To Do If You Meet a Bear

If you do come across a bear, stay calm. A bear may stand upright on its hind legs to get a better view, and it may drool, open its mouth wide, stomp the ground or lower its head as if it were about to charge. These are all warning signs for you to stay away. Remember, black bears are rather timid animals and would rather run to safety than fight. On rare occasions, black bears may “bluff charge” in your direction, running a couple of metres towards you and stopping in an effort to scare you. Bears who bluff charge should be given extra room and respect.

- 1 While facing the bear, slowly walk backwards until it no longer feels you are a threat.
- 2 If you see any of these signs, remain facing the bear and yell and make noise while slowly backing away. Often this will scare the bear away.
- 3 Never turn your back to a black bear or run from it, because doing so may excite it and cause it to chase you.
- 4 Do not attempt to get away by running, climbing a tree or swimming, as bears can do all of these things better than most people can.
- 5 If you have any food in your backpack, remove your pack and drop it on the ground as you back away. The bear may go after the food and completely forget you are there.
- 6 Do not “play dead” (lay motionless on the ground) — this does not work with black bears and may stir their curiosity and attract them to you.

### Bear Attacks

Bear attacks are very rare, but it is important to fight if a black bear attacks you. Scream, punch, hit and throw sticks or stones at the bear. Do whatever is necessary to make the bear stop attacking you and run away.

**If you are bear-savvy, you can have a safe and exciting time camping and hiking in Ontario’s wilderness. Just remember, you are a visitor in the habitat of many wild animals, and they deserve your respect.**

## Test your Bear Awareness

- 1 Name four threats to bear populations.
- 2 A black bears favorite food is: a. insects, b. blueberries, c. dandelions , d. rabbits
- 3 A standing black bear is most likely: a. about to attack b. trying to get a better look, c. threatening an adversary by appearing larger
- 4 If you live in bear country, feeding the birds year round may attract bears to your yard — true or false?

1. motor vehicles, hunting, habitat loss, predators such as other bears, wolves or lynx; 2. b; 3. b; 4. true



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# Black Bears

### Meet the Black Bear

Adult males can be almost two metres long from their broad snout to their short tail and weigh up to 300 kilograms. Females are smaller and weigh less than males. As their name suggests, black bears usually have black fur, but it may also be dark brown, beige or even blonde. There is even a subspecies of black bear in British Columbia that is white! It is known as the “spirit bear” or Kermode bear. Despite their small eyes and ears that appear too small for their bodies, black bears have a relatively good sense of both sight and smell. These mammals are very muscular and strong, making them agile climbers and very good swimmers, and able to run at speeds of up to 55 kilometres per hour over short distances.

### Opportunistic Omnivores

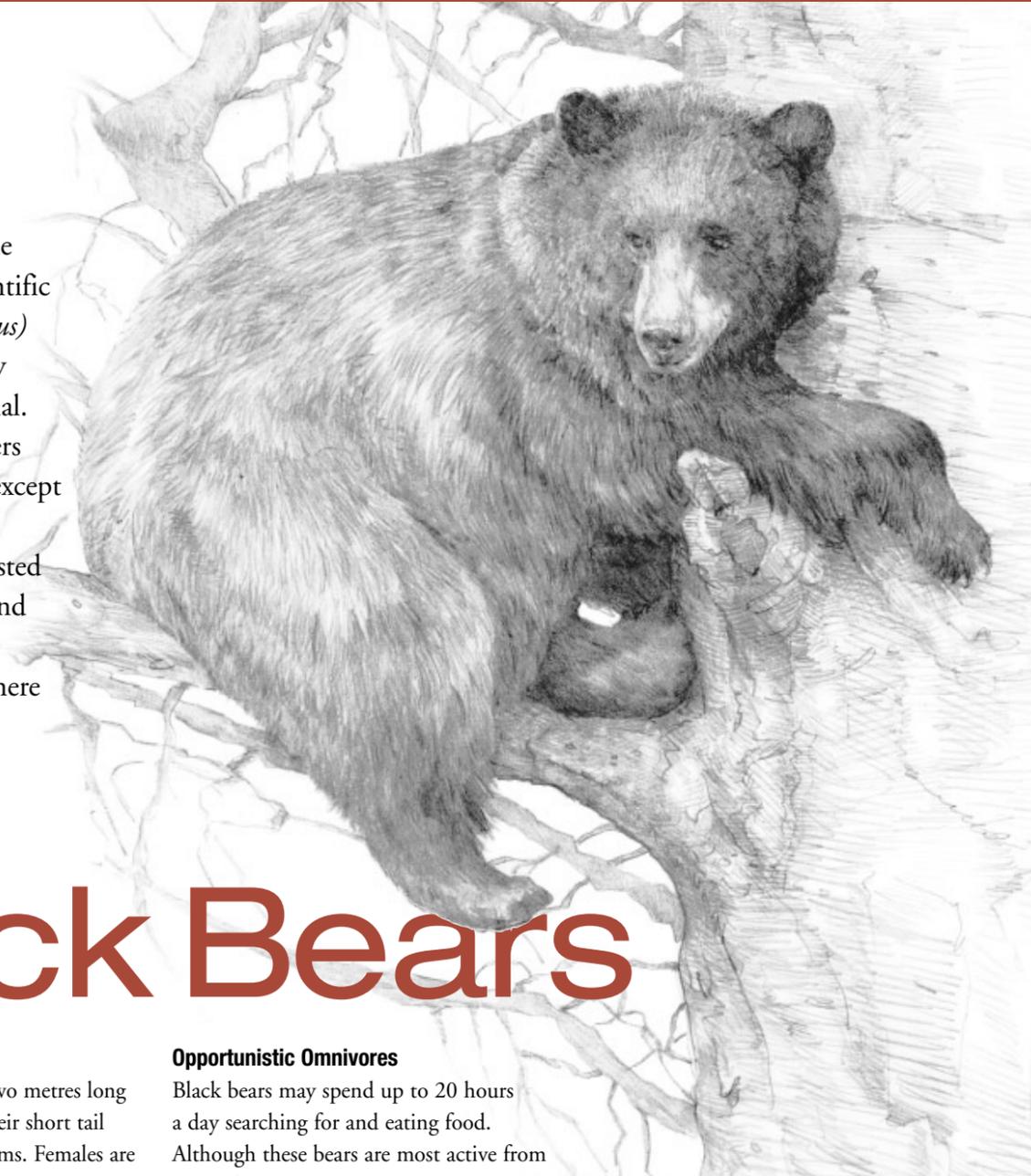
Black bears may spend up to 20 hours a day searching for and eating food. Although these bears are most active from just before sunrise until about two hours after sunset, in areas that people frequent, to avoid humans some bears are nocturnal (mostly active at night). Black bears will eat pretty much anything they come across. They use their powerful sense of smell to locate food. In the spring, they eat early budding plants such as willow, dandelions, clover and grasses. As food sources become more plentiful in the summer, black bears will feast on strawberries, raspberries and chokecherries, and seek out sources of protein such as fish, ants, bees or carrion (dead animals). For bears, when it comes to carrion, the stinkier it is, the better!

### Bear Paws

On each paw, black bears have five thick, powerful nonretractable claws with which they dig for food. Black bears are “plantigrades” — that is, they walk flat-footed like humans do.

A black bear’s foot is about the same length as an adult human’s, only much wider.

If you look at bear tracks, you will notice that these animals walk with their toes turned in (pigeon-toed), and the tracks their back feet make nearly cover the tracks of their front feet.



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## Black bears may eat up to 20,000 calories a day

Despite what you read in stories about bears, they do not necessarily have a sweet tooth for honey. They are more attracted to the bee larvae, an important source of protein, than the honey itself.

Bears are known to travel up to 100 kilometres in the late summer in search of a patch of blueberries, their favourite food. When berries are plentiful, black bears may eat up to 20,000 calories a day, which is equivalent to you eating 100 small hamburgers! These eating machines may gain up to a kilogram each day, doubling their spring weight by the time they are ready to hibernate in the fall. As fall approaches, the bear's diet changes to mainly hazelnuts, acorns and beechnuts.

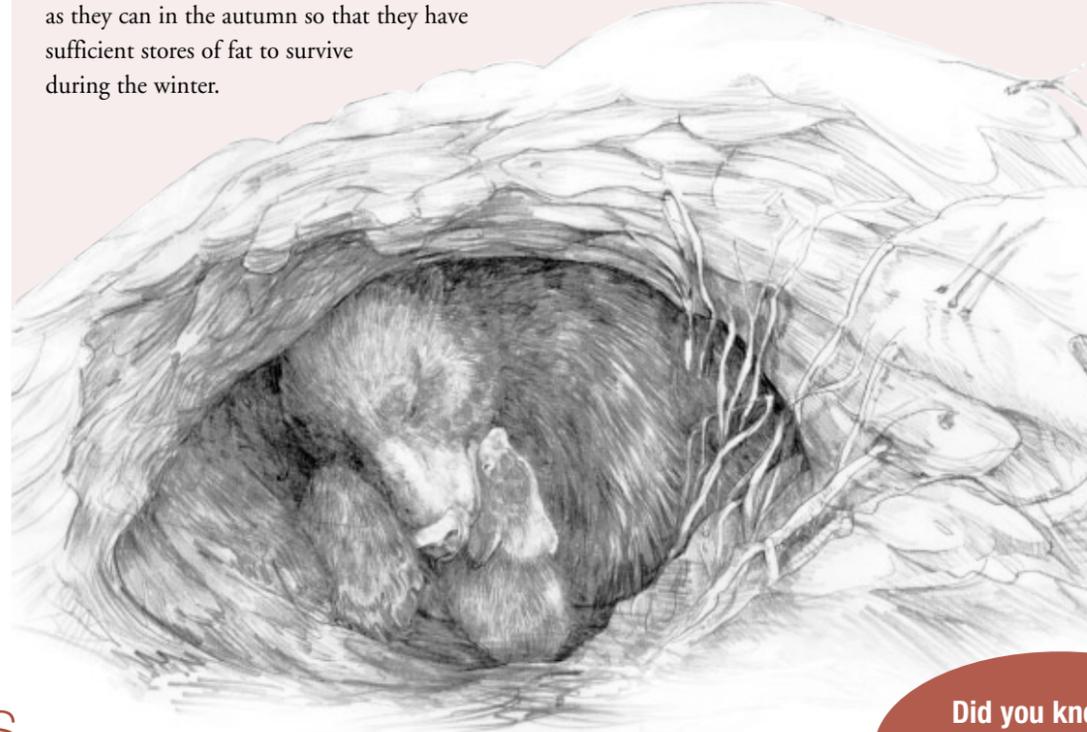
## A Long Winter's Nap

As temperatures drop and the days become cooler, black bears seek out a den in an abandoned burrow, a cave or a hollowed-out tree. They enter their dens in late October or early November. The abundance of food is the main factor that determines when black bears will begin hibernation.

As long as food is available, they will keep eating. Most black bears hibernate for four to six months. During hibernation, the bear's heart rate slows from about 45 beats per minute to only eight. This slower heart rate enables the black bear to sleep through the harsh winter without needing to seek food or water, both of which are scarce. Black bears must consume as much food as they can in the autumn so that they have sufficient stores of fat to survive during the winter.

Black bear dens are small and cramped.

Throughout the cold, harsh winter, the bear sleeps curled into a ball with its snout between its paws and its furry back towards the den opening. Although the den provides some protection against the bitter wind, often the temperature inside is nearly as cold as it is outside. The bear is able to survive the cold because of its inch-thick layer of insulating fat and thick fur. Male black bears usually come out of hibernation first, and the females emerge shortly after. New mothers typically are the last to come out of hibernation. Black bears may leave their hibernation dens to "stretch their legs" from time to time but stay in their den during the coldest winter months.



## Threats to black bears

**Even though black bears are big, strong animals, they still encounter many dangers.**

In the spring, many black bears search along roads for the tender shoots of plants. Unfortunately, this results in a number of bears being killed by passing vehicles. Black bears may become prey to larger black bears, wolves or lynx. Hunters and poachers shoot bears for sport or for their paws, claws or gallbladders, which some people believe have medicinal properties. In poor growing seasons, bears may die from starvation. The greatest threat to black bear populations is the destruction of their habitat — the clearing of forests for developments and roads.

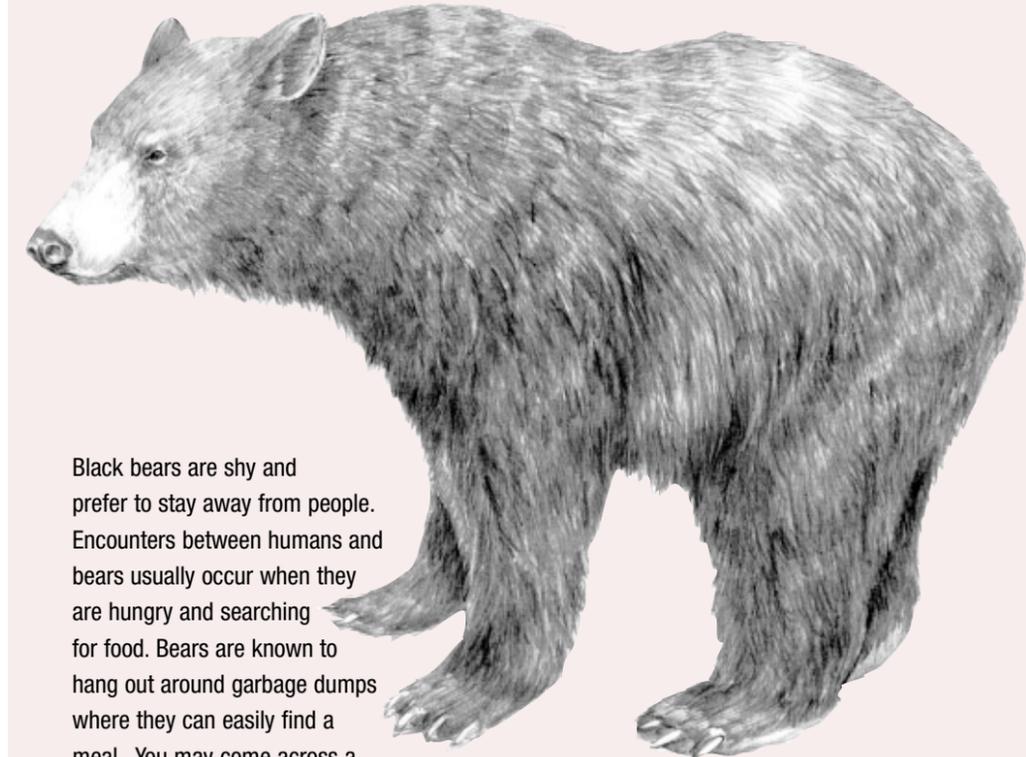
Wild black bears may live as long as 30 years, but the average lifespan is 10 to 15 years. The oldest known wild black bear was 42 years old!

**It is difficult to determine the size of the black bear population in Ontario, but it is estimated to be between 75,000 and 100,000.**

## Bear Encounters

**Black bears are shy and prefer to stay away from people**

Two famous black bears that nearly everyone would recognize are Smokey the Bear, who teaches about the dangers of wildfires, and Winnie-the-Pooh. Real bears are not friendly and cuddly like the one that sits on your bed or the ones in cartoons, but they are fascinating. Real bears are intelligent and strong, but they are wild animals and should be admired only from afar.



Black bears are shy and prefer to stay away from people. Encounters between humans and bears usually occur when they are hungry and searching for food. Bears are known to hang out around garbage dumps where they can easily find a meal. You may come across a bear while walking, hiking or camping in the woods, and if you live in a rural area, you may even encounter a bear trying to get into your garbage can, compost bin or having a snack at your birdfeeder. Bears may seek food around fruit trees and berry crops on farms. If you see a bear, do not try to get closer to take a picture. Keep away, and respect the power of this wild creature.

As they encounter people more and more, bears may lose their natural fear of humans. Some bears have been trained to return to campsites because people feed them or do not properly store their food and garbage. Most bear problems occur because of us.

### In the Forest

If you are in the forest, do not wear headphones, always travel in a group and be aware of your surroundings. Look for signs such as fresh tracks or scat (droppings) or claw marks on trees that indicate bears might be near. It is a good idea to sing or talk while walking in bear habitat. Making noise will give bears a heads-up that you are there and the chance for them to get to move away to where they feel safe. Some people wear a "bear bell" on their backpack to warn nearby bears of their approach. Studies have shown that "bear bells" can be effective on remote trails, where bears see few hikers. However, on trails where hiker numbers are greater, bears can learn to associate the bells with humans, and therefore food.

## Bear Cubs

In early January, one to four cubs are born in the snug winter den. Weighing only 200 to 300 grams (to compare, a hockey puck weighs about 150 grams), the tiny cubs grow rapidly on the mother's protein-rich, high-fat milk.

In late April or early May, the mother and her cubs emerge for the first time from their den.

The young stay with the mother for about a year and a half, learning how to find food and growing stronger. In the Great Lakes–St. Lawrence River region, where food for bears tends to be plentiful, females often produce litters every other year, while in the northern boreal forest, where food is scarce, females have a litter only every three or four years.



### Did you know...

Black bears are born with blue eyes that change brown as they age.