



Florida Black Bear

Florida black bears are the largest land mammals in the state. Male bears typically weigh between 250-400 pounds. Three adult male bears have tipped the scales at more than 600 pounds each. Females are smaller: 125-250 pounds each. Bear cubs at birth are smaller than a can of soda.

Big and scary? Cuddly and cute? The black bear is not a ferocious killer nor is it a cute teddy bear. Black bears typically want nothing to do with you and will run and hide from people when given the chance. However black bears are large and powerful wild animals and they have scratched and bitten people who have provoked them. Give the bear respect and space. Like most wildlife, if you don't bother it, the bear likely won't bother you.

If a black bear is nearby. If you encounter a bear at close range in your backyard or in the outdoors, remain standing, don't stare into the bear's eyes, back up slowly and speak to the bear in a calm voice. Don't run away, approach the bear or play dead. Find a safe place and make sure the bear has an escape route, then yell or bang pots and pans together to scare the bear away.



FWC



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Becoming a bear. People have created myths and told stories about bears for a very long time. In Scandinavia, there was a belief that people could change into bears or take on their characteristics. If a warrior put on a bearskin shirt (called a bear-sark) coated with oils and herbs, then he would gain the power of the animal. The English word "berserk" comes from this legend. Native American lore refers to bears as brother, uncle and grandmother and includes stories of bears becoming humans and vice versa.



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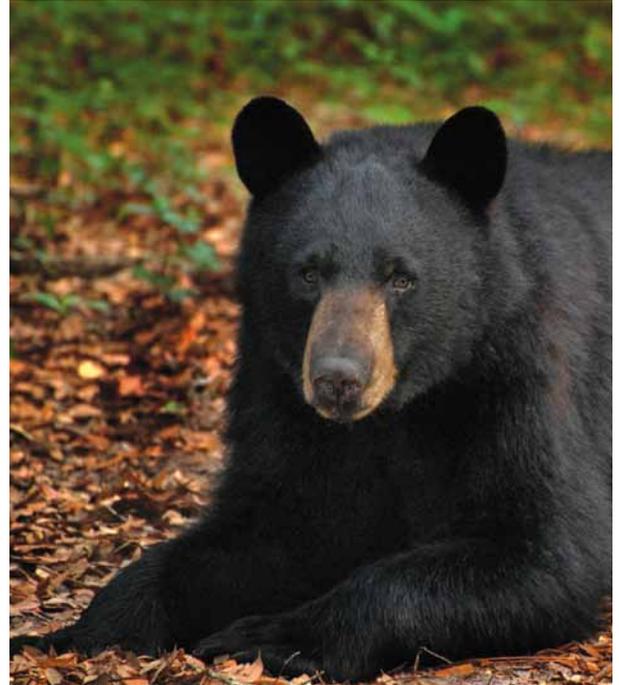


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"Bears are made of the same dust as we, and breathe the same winds and drink of the same waters. A bear's days are warmed by the same sun, his dwellings are overdomed by the same blue sky, and his life turns and ebbs with heart-pulsings like ours and was poured from the same fountain..." – John Muir

Old-timers in North America: Black bears have occupied this continent for an estimated 1.5 million years. Florida black bears (*Ursus americanus floridanus*) are one of 16 types of the American black bear.

How old is that bear over there? Check out its teeth. Rings are created each year on a bear's teeth during the winter when the bear is denning and eating very little. Look at a section of the bear's tooth under a microscope and you will see a ring for each year the bear has lived through a winter. The oldest wild bear documented in Florida was a 24-year-old female.



Cyndi Hoxie ©



Ashley Hockenberry ©

Gotta boogie! Black bears walk flat-footed, like people do, with all five toes on the ground. That's different than most animals which walk on their toes. Bears have a pacing stride, where both legs on the same side move together so that the hind foot is placed in or slightly in front of the track of the forefoot. While they look slow because of their shuffling gait, black bears can sprint at up to 35 miles an hour. Using their stout heavily curved claws, black bears like climbing trees. Bears' wide paws also are terrific paddles for swimming. When a bear sees land across water, it may swim for it!



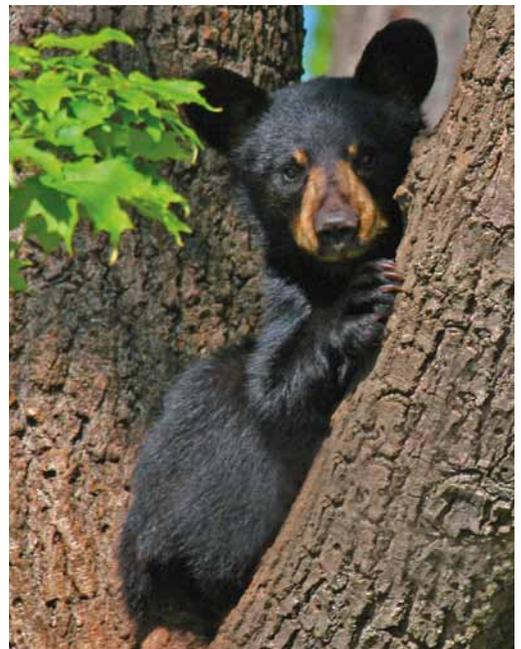
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Smell test. Look at the bear's long snout. That big nose should help you remember that the bear is able to sniff something that is up to a mile away! Have you heard about the bear that raided a vacation home and ate all the canned goods except for two unopened cans of sauerkraut? That is just one of many stories about bears' amazing sense of smell.

Menu for a Florida black bear: Florida black bears are omnivores, eating both plants and animals. Their diet is mostly vegetarian sprinkled with insects, with animals being only 5 percent of their food. A bear's menu includes: saw palmetto, corn, persimmon, sunflower, oak, wild coffee, blackberry, blueberry, sassafras, ferns, bees, wasps, yellow jackets, carpenter ants, beetles, crayfish, bird eggs, alligator eggs, armadillos, opossums, rabbits, raccoons and turtles. Honey, naturally, is also a favorite.

You thought just teenagers were hungry? Florida black bears become eating machines in the fall when they need to bulk up for their winter naps – their appetites quadruple from eating 5,000 calories a day up to 20,000 calories a day. This brings us to what humans can do to protect both themselves and bears. Please keep garbage away from bears. Store your garbage in a garage or sturdy shed, or get a bear-proof garbage can or dumpster. Bring pet food or bird seed inside at night. Put an electric fence around beehives, gardens and livestock. Otherwise bears may be tempted to leave the forest to get food in your neighborhood. Chomping down a 25-pound sack of dog food is easier for bears than looking for 11,000 acorns to get the same calories. But when bears begin to hang out in places where people are, they can get into trouble. It not only is illegal in Florida to leave out food for bears, but eliminating food sources that will attract bears is also the best thing you can do to prevent human-bear conflicts.

Jarhead: A little bear in big trouble. A bear family was doing what it shouldn't be doing, rummaging through garbage cans in a small community near the Ocala National Forest in summer 2010. A resident called the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) to report that one of the bear cubs was running around with a big clear plastic jar stuck over its head. It sure looked funny, but the little bear – now nicknamed Jarhead – would die from starvation if FWC could not catch it and remove the container. Traps were set and the bears were tracked for eight days based on sightings. Then the bear family disappeared. Just as the FWC team almost gave up, Jarhead and his family reappeared. Mother bear was successfully tranquilized and Jarhead was caught and freed from his weird headgear. The family later was released in a more remote area. A happy ending for Jarhead and a reminder why people should keep their garbage away from bears.



Ashley Hockenberry ©



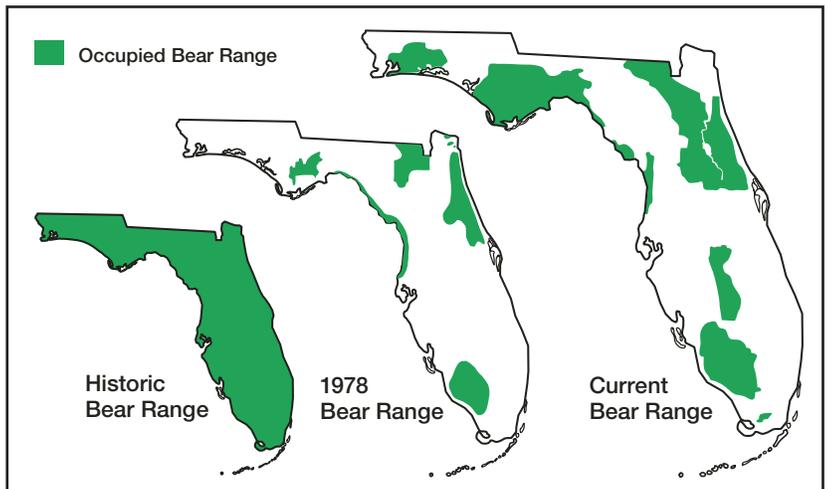
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Warning! Bear crossing. The biggest immediate danger to a Florida black bear is crossing a road. You may notice bear crossing signs on the roads in Florida are near where lots of bears live. There is a good reason to be watchful and slow down when driving in those areas, especially at dawn and dusk when bears are more active. Cars and trucks colliding with bears is the major cause of known bear deaths in the state. In 2010, 146 bears were killed by vehicles in Florida.

The bicyclist and the bear. It is rare but it happens – a bear just bumps into someone. In July 2011, a man riding his bike to work at Tyndall Air Force Base in the Panhandle was knocked over by a bear of about 300 pounds crossing the road. The black bear was running across the highway and crashed by accident into the bicyclist. The man suffered minor injuries and the bike's rear wheel was damaged. The bear just kept on going into the nearby woods.

Hey bear, your hair gives your identity away. OK, you know bears are hairy. That's pretty obvious. What you may not know is that the hair on each individual bear is different. Bear biologists at the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission are able to analyze the DNA from roots of collected bear hair and identify specific bears. To get the sample tufts of hair, the biologists set up bait stations using doughnuts. Bears must cross over or under barbed wire to get the doughnuts and are, of course, unaware their DNA is captured as barbed wire snags their hair. The DNA analysis of bear hair is allowing biologists to more accurately count the number of bears in Florida, now estimated to be about 3,000.

Bear conservation. Loss of large forested lands and swamps is the biggest challenge to long-term conservation of the Florida black bear; especially in a growing state of nearly 19 million people soon to be the third most populated state in the nation. A male Florida black bear's range is about 60,000 acres and females range 15,000 acres. The conservation of key wildlife habitats has allowed bear populations room to expand their range, growing from just 300 bears in the 1970s to about 3,000 today. Large tracts of public lands, coupled with private



landowners whose management practices are good for wildlife, have made a huge difference for bears. Today the largest populations of bears are concentrated in the Panhandle, northeast Florida and southwest Florida with a few smaller groups in other areas. Bottom line is that the bear's biggest friend is you and others who care about bears. By learning about bears and sharing your knowledge with others, you can help conserve the Florida black bear so it continues striding across the state for generations to come.