

Living with Wildlife in Bear Country

Who to Contact about Bear Conflicts

If you have a potentially life-threatening situation with a black bear, or if an injury occurs, *please contact the Division of Wildlife, Monday through Friday, 8AM – 5PM, as listed below. After hours, contact the [Colorado State Patrol](#) or your local Sheriff's Department.*

To report property damage, please contact the Division during normal business hours. Your report is very important to us.

DOW Headquarters (Denver): 303/297-1192
Northeast Service Center (Denver): 303/291-7227
Fort Collins Service Center: 970/472-4300
Southeast Service Center (Colo. Springs): 719/227-5200
Northwest Service Center (Grand Junction): 970/255-6100
Southwest Service Center (Durango): 970/247-0855
Montrose Service Center: 970/252-6000
Gunnison Service Center: 970/641-7060

What if You Encounter a Black Bear?

There are no definite rules about what to do if you meet a bear. In almost all cases, the bear will detect you first and will leave the area. Bear attacks are rare compared to the number of close encounters. However, if you do meet a bear before it has had time to leave the area, here are some suggestions.

Remember: Every situation is different with respect to the bear, the terrain, the people, and their activity.

Stay calm. If you see a bear and it hasn't seen you, calmly leave the area. As you move away, talk aloud to let the bear discover your presence.

Stop. Back away slowly while facing the bear. Avoid direct eye contact as bears may perceive this as a threat. Give the bear plenty of room to escape. Wild bears rarely attack people unless they feel threatened or provoked.

If on a trail, step off the trail on the downhill side and slowly leave the area. Don't run or make any sudden movements. Running is likely to prompt the bear to give chase and you can't outrun a bear. Do not attempt climbing trees to escape black bears. This may stimulate the bear to follow and pull you out by the foot. Stand your ground.

Speak softly. This may reassure the bear that no harm is meant to it. Try not to show fear.

In contrast to grizzly bears, female black bears do not normally defend their cubs aggressively; but send them up trees. However, **use extra caution if you encounter a female black bear with cubs.** Move away from the cub; be on the lookout for other cubs.

Bears use all their senses to try to identify what you are. *Remember:* Their eyesight is good and their sense of smell is acute. If a bear stands upright or moves closer, it may be trying to detect smells in the air. This isn't a sign of aggression. Once it identifies you, it may leave the area or try to intimidate you by charging to within a few feet before it withdraws.

Fight back if a black bear attacks you. Black bears have been driven away when people have fought back with rocks, sticks, binoculars and even their bare hands.

Living in Bear Country

If you choose to live, or have a summer home, in bear country, make sure you don't contribute to resident bears becoming 'garbage' bears. Most conflicts between bears and people are linked to careless handling of food or garbage. Don't let your carelessness cause the unnecessary death of a bear. Learn to live responsibly with wildlife!



Black bears eat almost anything. They will eat human food, garbage, hummingbird food, and pet and livestock food when available. Once a bear has found the easily accessible, consistent food source that human settlements can offer, it may overcome its wariness of people and visit regularly, increasing the chance of a human/bear encounter. You and your neighbors can make a difference. Your actions may prevent the unnecessary death of a bear!

Make your property safe by keeping garbage out of reach and smell of bears. Use bear-proof trash containers. Be sure garbage cans are emptied regularly. Periodically clean garbage cans to reduce residual odor—using hot

water and chlorine bleach, or by burning trash residue in cans. Store trash in a bear proof enclosure. [Contact the Division of Wildlife](#) for designs.

If you have pets, do not store their food or feed them outside. Clean your BBQ grill of grease and store inside. Hang bird seed, suet and hummingbird feeders on a wire between trees instead of on your deck or porch. Bring all bird feeders in at night. Do not put fruit, melon rinds and other tasty items in mulch or compost piles.

[See some bear proof containers.](#) (The Division of Wildlife offers this link for informational purposes only. The Division does not endorse any of the products or vendors mentioned within.)

As you might guess, beehives attract bears. *You can protect your bees, honey, and equipment if you surround the hives with fences designed to keep bears out.* [Contact the Division of Wildlife](#) for designs.

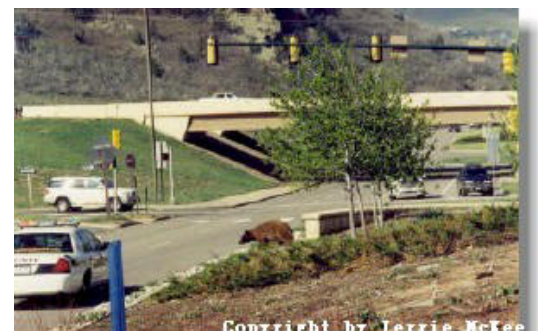
Most bears sighted in residential areas within bear habitat do not cause any damage. If a bear doesn't find abundant food, it will move on.

Camping or Hiking in Bear Country

Although black bears are generally shy and avoid human contacts, there are some precautions you can take to avoid encounters if you camp and hike in bear country. You are responsible for doing all you can to prevent conflicts with bears. If a bear gets food from you, it's likely to behave more aggressively toward the next people it meets. Don't reward a bear for associating with people.

Camping:

Keep your camp clean. Store food and garbage properly at all times. Keep your tent and sleeping bag free of all food smells. Store the clothes you wore while cooking or eating with your food. Burn all grease off grills and camp stoves. Wipe table and clean up eating area thoroughly.



Store your food safely. Store all your food and coolers in your car trunk or suspended from a tree—at least ten feet off the ground and four feet out from the tree trunk. Don't underestimate the ingenuity of a bear! *Vehicles are not bear proof.*

Dispose of garbage properly. Put it in bear-proof garbage cans where available or secure it with your food and then pack it out. Don't burn or bury garbage. Bears will dig it up.

Sleep well away from food areas. Move some distance away from your cooking area or food storage site.

Store any toiletries safely. Store them with your food—the smell of toiletries may attract bears. Abstain from sexual activity. Practice good personal hygiene.

Hiking:

Enjoy the woods! Hiking at dawn or dusk may increase your chances of meeting a bear. Use extra caution in places where hearing or visibility is limited: in brushy areas, near streams, where trails round a bend or on windy days. Avoid berry patches in fall. Reduce your chances of surprising a bear by making noise—talk or sing.

Make sure children are close to you or at least within your sight at all times. Leave your dog at home or have it on a leash.

Other Sources of Information

Do you live in the Durango area? Area residents, concerned about bear and human conflicts in the region, came together in 2003 and formed [Bear Smart Durango](#). The organization believes that bear and human conflict in Durango has as much to do with the behavior of people as it does with bears, and that people and bears can safely coexist. They feel that coexisting with wildlife is their responsibility and created a Web site to educate others about avoiding conflicts with wildlife.

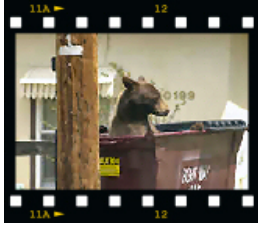
Do You Live in Boulder? The City of Boulder provides a WEB page for its citizens with information on bears in Boulder County. You can find it by going to the [City of Boulder—Mountain Lions and Black Bears page](#).

[The Get Bear Smart Society](#) champions management policies that reduce both the number of human-bear conflicts and the number of bears destroyed. Their mission is to provide a safe environment in which people and bears can coexist in harmony.

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Black Bears at a Glance

Black bears are the most common and generally the smallest of North American bears. Others include the grizzly/brown and the polar bear. Today, only the black bear is known to exist in Colorado. Although we do not know exactly how many black bears live in Colorado, population estimates range from 8,000 to 12,000 bears. A black bear may live 20 years in the wild, although very few do, and up to 25-30 years in captivity. Black bears are very agile, can run in bursts up to 35 mph and can run up or down hills quickly and easily. Their short, curved claws help them to climb trees. Black bears are strong swimmers.



Threats to black bears include accidents, disease, motor vehicles and starvation. Natural enemies include other bears and mountain lions. Humans are responsible for the deaths of most black bears: loss of habitat, feeding, illegal killing, destruction of bears that pose a threat to people or livestock and property. Prior to 1935, there was unlimited hunting of black bears. The designation of bears as game animals in 1935 provided for their management and protection.

Current hunting regulations protect cubs, and females with cubs, and prohibit the use of dogs and baiting.

Physical Appearance

Ursus americanus, meaning "American black bear", is the bear's scientific name. Despite the common name, black bear, they aren't always black. They may be honey-colored, blond, brown or black. They may have a tan muzzle or a white spot on their chest. Most Colorado black bears are some shade of brown, and they sometimes appear cinnamon-colored, leading some people to mistake them for grizzly bears.

A black bear's body appears heavy and is supported by short, powerful legs. The highest point of a black bear is the lower-middle of its back. There is no prominent shoulder hump as there is on the larger grizzly bear.

Black bears vary in size and weight, with males generally being larger than females. Adult males average 275 pounds while the adult female may average 175 pounds. Depending on the season, food supply and gender, they may weigh anywhere from 125 to 450 pounds. Black bears measure about 3 feet high when on all 4 feet or about 5 feet tall standing upright.



Signs and Sounds

Black bear tracks are very distinctive—the hind footprint resembles that of a human. All bears have 5 toes, with the front foot short and about 4-5 inches wide. The hind foot is long and narrow, measuring about 7 inches. Claw marks may or may not be visible.

Bears use trails just as people do since it's easier to travel on a trail than through underbrush. Being aware of tracks, droppings and other bear signs (claw marks on trees, rotten logs ripped apart and hair on tree bark from rubbing), will allow you to determine better the presence of bears.

It's easy to recognize a black bear's sizable droppings of plant leaves, partly digested berries, seeds or animal hair. Black bears are solitary. They don't associate with other bears except sows with cubs or during breeding. Bears may gather at a place with abundant food – for feeding.

Bears are intelligent and curious. They can see colors, form and movement. Although their vision is good, they generally rely on their acute senses of smell and hearing to locate food and warn them of danger.

Adult black bears make a variety of sounds. However, the most commonly heard sounds are woofing and jaw-popping. The young ones whimper or bawl.

To hear some bear sounds and view a short bear video, go to the [Kid's Discovery Pages](#).

Habitat

Black bears have long been viewed as forest dwelling animals. However, an unbroken expanse of forest doesn't provide enough food for black bears. They need berry patches and stream bottoms to satisfy their appetites for plants and insects.

In Colorado, the largest black bear populations are found in areas dominated by Gambel's oak and aspen near open areas of chokecherry and serviceberry bushes.

Every bear has a home range where it finds all it needs. It travels to different areas of its home range as snow recedes, plants sprout and berries ripen.

In general, black bears may range from 10 to 250 square miles. Adult males occupy the largest areas, while females usually establish their home range close to their mothers'.

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Hunting and Feeding Habits

Bears may be active anytime, day or night, most often during morning and evening twilight. When not feeding or looking for food, they rest in day beds – next to a log in a windfall, in dense brush or in a depression.

Black bears are omnivores—they eat both plants and animals. About 90 percent of a bear's diet is made up of nutritious plants, while about 10 percent of its diet consists of animals.

Bears will eat broad-leafed flowering plants, berries, nuts, insects, carrion (dead animal carcasses) and grasses.

In late summer, black bears are trying to fatten up for winter hibernation. During this period, they may be actively feeding for up to 20 hours per day and may ingest 20,000 calories daily.



Bears and Winter

Since little food is available during winter, bears would have difficulty surviving if they remained active, so they hibernate. In Colorado, female bears enter their dens in late October and males in early November.

Black bears commonly den in rock caverns, excavated holes beneath shrubs or trees, in hollow logs or rotten trees and in brush thickets. Rock caverns are the most common kind of den in western Colorado.

A hibernating bear's heart rate and breathing slow, and its body temperature drops 4-12° F. During this time, bears do not eat, drink or eliminate body wastes. They maintain their energy levels and water balance by using stored fat. When bears leave the den, snow may still be on the ground, but green-up has usually begun at lower elevations.

Many bears will move to lower areas in spring. Also, it's a couple weeks before the bear's digestive system becomes active. During this critical period, the bear must rely on the remaining stored fat.

Mating and Breeding

In Colorado, male bears are capable of breeding at three years of age. A few female bears may have cubs at three or four years, although five years is more common.

Bears mate in early summer, but development of the fertilized egg is delayed until November. If the female enters the den in poor condition, it is believed she will reabsorb the fertilized egg rather than continue development of a fetus.

The female bear generally does not breed again while her cubs are with her.

Birth to Maturity

After a two to three month gestation period, one to three (usually two) tiny cubs are born in midwinter. They are blind, toothless and covered with very fine hair at birth.

Nurtured with their mother's rich milk, they grow from less than one pound at birth to an average of 10-20 pounds by the time they all emerge from the den in mid-May.

Care of the cubs rests solely with the female. The cubs watch their mother and learn by mimicking her. Most black bear cubs stay with their mother for one year. The young may climb trees for protection or when they are threatened.

By the time the black bear cubs' second spring arrives, they have become more self-reliant. Littermates may stay together through the summer and perhaps even den together. Cubs will usually not reunite with their mother. Some cubs separate from their mother in their first autumn and become independent.

To Learn More about Black Bears

For the most part, people and wildlife can coexist. Living with wildlife is an enjoyable part of being a resident of Colorado. The key to coexisting is to respect wildlife and its habitat.

Learn more about black bears:

Bears—Their Biology and Management, 1999, Proceedings from the International Conference on Bear Research and Management (also 1970, 1974, 1977, 1980, 1983, 1986, 1989).

Black Bear: The Spirit of the Wilderness, 1981, by Barbara Ford, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, MA.

Black Bears of West-Central Colorado, 1991, by Tom Beck, Colorado Division of Wildlife, Technical Publication #39.

Bear Attacks: Their Causes and Avoidance, 1985, by Stephen Herrero, Nick Lyons Books/Winchester Press, New York, NY.

The Wonder Series: The Everywhere Bear, A Story and Activities by Sandra Chisholm Robinson, Denver Museum of Natural History, CO.