



Carnivores

Order Carnivora



Carnivores eat other animals. They are physically designed to hunt, capture and consume meat. Some carnivores, like cats, silently stalk their prey. Some, like wolves, run in packs to pursue their prey and run them down. And some, like weasels, live in close proximity with their prey, slinking right down their prey's burrow to trap and confront them.

Pennsylvania's carnivores include bears, wild cats, wild dogs, raccoons, skunks, river otters, minks and martens. All carnivores are adapted to chew and digest meat. But bears, foxes, skunks and raccoons all eat a mostly omniverous diet, consuming large amounts of fruits, seeds, nuts and berries, along with their prey. All carnivores will take advantage of **carrion** when they find it. It's hard work being a predator. Coming across a dead animal means an easy meal.

One primary physical feature that helps identify carnivores is their teeth. There are usually four types of teeth found in most mammal skulls: incisors, canines, premolars and molars. **All carnivores have 4 large canine teeth** - located to the sides of the incisors. The canines are sharp, curved, conical-shaped teeth used for piercing flesh. In some carnivores, like wild cats they are quite long. Behind the canine teeth are usually a set of upper and lower premolars called **carnassials**. Carnassials are pointed and slightly slanted to help slice off meat. Wild cats and dogs have more defined carnassials than bears - who eat more plant matter. Those carnivores that rely more on plant food have flatter molars for grinding vegetation as they chew.



Eye placement is another important feature of carnivores. The eyes of carnivores are placed on the front of their faces (like ours) giving them **binocular vision**. Being able to judge distances is an important tool when a predator is about to pounce on or reach for moving prey.

While all carnivores covered in this chapter share these features, **diversity abounds among Pennsylvania's carnivores.** Just consider this: The black bear is our largest carnivore, possibly weighing in at a whopping 800 pounds, while our smallest carnivore, the least weasel, barely tips the scales at two ounces!

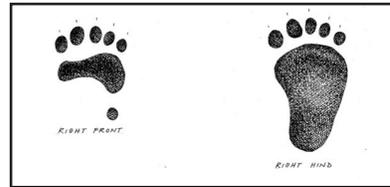
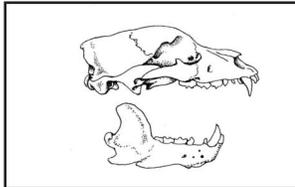
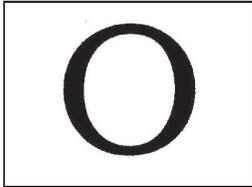
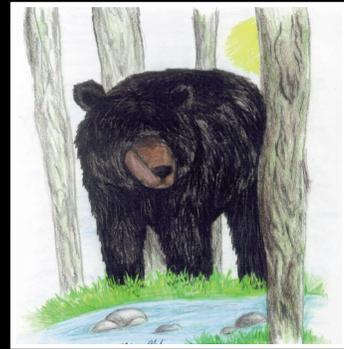


Hal Koerber / PGC Photo



Black Bear

Family Ursidae
Ursus americanus



Like wolves, **Black Bears** have roamed our state since the days before the earliest human settlements. But unlike wolves, the big bru-ins are still here. Our bear population has actually been growing for decades along with our state's residential development - meaning bears and people are coming into contact with one another more than ever before.

Many encounters occur when bears associate people & their cabins, campsites or backporches with food. Learning about bear behavior is an important safety measure, not only for people who live near bears, but for the survival of bears too.

Fortunately, bear encounters in the Commonwealth are almost always harmless. However, even if they appear docile, **black bears are large animals capable of amazing bursts of speed and tremendous strength.** At the very least, they need some respect.



THE BEAR FACTS

***Ursus americanus* is the black bear's scientific name; it means "American bear."** Three species of bears inhabit North America, but only the black bear is found in Pennsylvania. The PA Game Commission estimates our black bear population around 15,000 animals.

Black bears appear heavy, but they **are surprisingly agile**; they can run up to 35 mph, climb trees and swim well. They may live up to 25 years. Black bears are intelligent and curious.

Adults usually weigh around 200 pounds. Males are heavier than females, often more than twice as much. Some weigh up to 600 or more pounds and rare individuals up to 900 have been found. **Pennsylvania is known for its large black bears.**

Males are called boars; females, sows. Their young are called cubs. Black bears measure about three feet high when on all fours or about five to seven feet tall when standing upright.

Bears may be on the move at any time, but they're usually **most active at dusk and dawn.**

MORE BEAR FACTS

Adult black bears make a variety of sounds that include woofs, growls and jaw-popping when they are especially disturbed. Sows communicate with their cubs by using low grunts or huffs. Cubs whimper, chuckle and bawl.

Physically adapted to be predators, their diet actually indicates they are **mostly omnivorous**, eating almost anything, from berries, corn, acorns, beechnuts and even grass, to table scraps, carrion, honey and insects. During late summer and fall, **black bears fatten up for winter hibernation** by feeding for up to 20 hours a day, ingesting up to 20,000 calories.

Black bears will also consume almost anything people and their pets eat. **The best way to prevent bears from getting too close is to remove that food source for at least a month or more.** This protects both the bears and us.

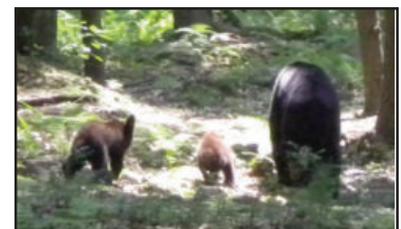
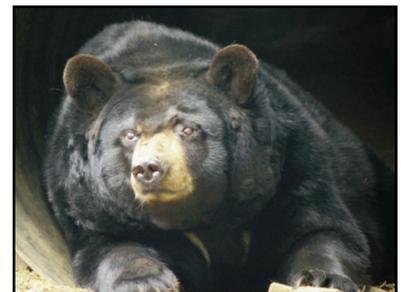


Curiosity makes a bear stand up, not aggression. Biologists believe that bears can see colors. But their sense of smell is even keener than their eyesight. When something has caught their attention, bears will stand up for a better look around. Or a better whiff of the scent coming from the direction of that sight, sound or smell.

Despite their name, **black bears are not always black.** They may be cinnamon-colored or even blond, though that is quite rare.

Sows give birth in January with litters of one to five cubs born in the middle of her winter sleep. **But it is not a true hibernation.** The newborns are blind, toothless & covered with short, fine hair. The sow's rich milk enables them to grow quickly and they are ready to leave the den with the sow in early April. Males do not help rear young.

Most cubs stay with the sow for a little more than a year, learning what to eat and how to hunt by imitating their mother. Very protective **she will send the cubs up trees if danger threatens.** One of the greatest threats to the cubs are adult male bears who occasionally kill and eat them. When the cubs are about a year and a half old, the sow is again ready to breed and will send the cubs out on their own while she prepares to raise a new family.



Bears in winter. Imagine the wintry landscape of a snow-covered woodland. Grouse & nuthatches search for seeds and winter berries while elk & hares gently bed down in sheltered coverts between meals. It's a pretty scene, but you'll rarely see a bear ambling through it. **Bears do not fully hibernate like a groundhog**, but they are usually dormant throughout the winter.

Despite a full thick coat of fur that seems perfectly designed to withstand cold weather, bears succeed by **spending the coldest part of the year in a deep sleep**. Dens could be rock caverns, excavated holes beneath trees or dead falls, in hollow trees or in brushy thickets.

During this extended sleep, a bear's heart rate and breathing slow, and its body temperature drops slightly. They don't eat or pass body wastes. Stored fat helps the make it through the winter.

Amazingly, bear sows usually give birth during this dormancy. Her body is still able to provide milk for her nursing cubs while she sleeps.

Winter is also the time when biologists enter bear dens to check on the health of the sow, adjust radio collars if necessary, and record vital statistics on her newborn cubs.



Ever wonder how the teddy bear got its name? From **Theodore Roosevelt**, our 26th president. Roosevelt was an avid hunter and naturalist. One version of the often-changed story says he was helping to settle an argument between Louisiana and Mississippi in 1902 to determine where the state border was located. During a local bear hunt a fellow hunter captured and tied a bear to a tree and asked Roosevelt to shoot it. **Roosevelt said killing the animal in such a manner was unsportsmanlike.**

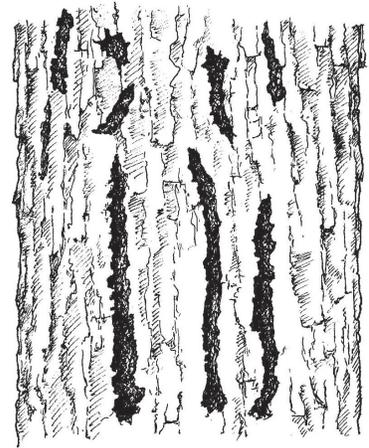
Within days *The Washington Post* ran a political cartoon depicting the event. Soon after, some store owners in New York made a few small stuffed bears to sell in their store. One of the store owners wrote to the president asking his permission to call them "Teddy Bears." President Roosevelt granted them permission, but didn't think the bears would sell. Little did he know.

President Roosevelt's daughter Alice was reported to be the first child to ever receive an "official" Teddy Bear, but she wouldn't be the last. Since then, children around the world have enjoyed cuddling a stuffed bear.



How do you study a bear (or any other mammal) if you cannot see it? **Biologists have a variety of methods for tracking bears.** Bear tracks are relatively easy to recognize. Each footprint has five toes & claws that may or may not be visible in the track. **The hind foot is almost twice as large as the front foot.** The hind foot is long & narrow like a human footprint. This similarity and the tendency of a bear to stand up on its hind feet led Native Americans to call bears their “Brothers.”

Bears create and repeatedly use trails just like people do, leaving behind evidence of their passing. Biologists search for tracks in soft earth or around mud puddles. **Or look for claw marks (at right) on smooth-bark trees** or rotten logs that have been ripped apart when they hunted for insects.



Bear scat is an important method of tracking bears. The scat or droppings of bears are large and usually has partially digested remains in it - such as berry seeds, plant stems or the fur or bones of animals they fed on. Putting a radio collar on a bear to follow them electronically is also a popular method that biologists use to keep track of Pennsylvania’s bruin population.



When in bear country common sense says to make noise. Bears do not like to be surprised. **Whistling, talking loud & clapping your hands may be enough noise to make a black bear turn in another direction.** *What about grizzly bears?* We don’t have grizzly bears (left) in the eastern United States. But if you were traveling out west, wildlife biologists suggest wearing bells around your neck, using a whistle and taking pepper spray with you, just in case a grizzly is near.

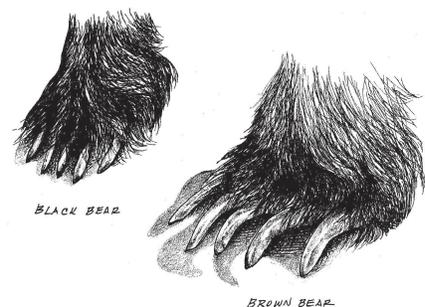


How can you tell black bear scat from grizzly scat if you happen to be out west? A bear expert in Yellowstone National Park once told this funny story around a campfire to convince park visitors to be really, really careful around bears.

“Black bear scat is often filled with berries and seeds, since black bears often feed on fruits and nuts. Grizzly scat can be identified by the smell of pepper spray, and the small pieces of bells and whistles in it!!!”

Different species of bears use their various-shaped claws for different purposes. The shorter, curved claws of the **black bear (right)** are designed for climbing trees where they seek shelter when alarmed.

The larger claws of the **brown bear (far right)** are ideal for digging into prairie dog burrow or shredding tree bark to find insects underneath.



Today **the status of black bears in Pennsylvania is good**. In 1980 the state's bear population was estimated at approximately 4,500. Over twenty-five years later those numbers have tripled to about 15,000 animals. **Because the population is considered stable there is an annual bear season** lasting on average for one to several days each year, depending on the number of bears taken during the previous season. In recent years, an average of 3,000 bears have been killed. According to the PA Game Commission **"Pennsylvania is home to "World-class trophy bears"** – providing hunters with the possibility of taking a bruin that weighs 700 to 800 pounds."



A Simple Review of Bears



Maybe you grew up watching *Yogi Bear* cartoons. Maybe you went to sleep at night having *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* read aloud to you. Maybe you still have a Teddy Bear tucked into your bed. **We have all grown up with an image of bears.** But few of those images of bears are like the real bears.

Only one bear lives in Pennsylvania - the Black Bear. They are our largest mammal. We probably have the largest black bears in the country. Black bears are covered with thick black fur and a brown muzzle. Some black bears come in different shades of brown too. **Bears may look warm & cuddly, but they are really strong and really fast - faster than any person.**

They are big predators designed to kill. **Fortunately, most black bears are only interested in killing insects & fish or eating berries, insects and honey.** They will also eat carrion (dead animals).

Bears walk on the soles of all four feet. This is called being a **plantigrade**. They can also stand up on their hind feet. They do this to get a better idea of what's going on around them. Their footprints and their posture reminded native Americans of humans, so **many tribes referred to bears as their "brothers."**

Bears are very intelligent. They may seem very shy, but they just prefer to be secretive. **Black bears climb trees when they feel threatened.** Their shorter, curved claws are well adapted for pulling them up into the branches. They are also good swimmers.

Bears are omnivores. They belong to the **Order Carnivore** and have large canine teeth like most carnivores. But bears also have flattened back teeth called molars that help them grind up plant matter. So bears eat both plants and animals. A true carnivore like a wolf has sharp molars for tearing meat. Because bears are so big, they spend a lot of their time rooting around for food.

Black bears (below left) belong to the **family Ursidae**, which includes polar bears (below center) and grizzly bears (below right). Black bears may be the smallest of these three bears, but some bears in our state have reached nearly 800 pounds. So they are only considered small compared to something the size of a polar bear.



Bears all have a **stocky build** with a short, stubby tail. They have very large skulls with a long nose and a **superb sense of smell**. Their eyes are small for their large heads and their ears are small and rounded. Their eyesight and hearing are not their best senses.



Bear cubs are born in a den. They are almost naked, very tiny and their eyes are closed. The cubs nurse their mother's milk for up to one year. Then they begin eating small amounts of the same foods their mother eats. They may not leave the den until they are two to three months old. **They always travel with their mother, who protects them fiercely.** You never want to get between a sow and her cubs. These normally quiet animals might become aggressive. And you could be hurt.

Bears usually live alone unless the mother bear (sow) is raising cubs. Black bears sleep a lot in a den like a hollow tree or small rock cave. **Most of their winter is spent sleeping. This helps them save energy when food supplies are low.** They do not hibernate. But we call their deep sleep a torpor. The cubs are born when the sows are in a torpor sleep. **Even during the warmer months of the year, bears spend a great deal of time resting.**

