

Nature on Trail »

The Bear Facts

The secret life of those big black bruins of the backwoods

I remember that day well—I was hiking around Cougar Mountain near Issaquah in the late spring. I heard a noise above the trail that sounded like a freight train coming down the mountain. I heard small trees breaking and brush being pushed aside. I knew that a large animal was coming down towards me. I thought it might be a deer from the speed it was going, but there it was: a 500-pound black bear taking a look at me. The bear didn't even stop—he just continued his steep descent down the hill and then he was gone.

I was surprised by the speed of the bear, but most bears can move faster than a human. Even a 500-pound black bear can run about 30 miles per hour. The black bear is classified as a carnivore, but it rarely hunts for larger animals. The bear, like humans, is an opportunist and will feed on what is readily around, such as berries, insects, fish, flowers, roots and your camp food—if you leave it out.

On average, a male black bear weighs about 225 pounds. A bear must bulk up for the winter months, when it goes into hibernation. A bear can lose 20 to 40 percent of its body weight during the winter hibernation months. Black bears are not true hibernators and may move from den to den in mild weather conditions. Black bears may den from October into April within tree cavities, under downed logs or within rock outcrops. Wild bears can live up to 20 years.

Black bears, like some hikers, are reclusive animals that will flee to avoid contact with humans. The bear will follow a well-worn animal trail or even a hiking trail to its favorite food source. You can tell that a bear is around if you see many broken ferns along a trail or see a tree that has shredded bark above your head.

The black bear loves to stand up on its hind legs and sharpen its claws on trees. I have seen a small cedar tree that was totally shredded seven feet up. The sharp, curved claws let the bear easily climb trees, or dig into a rotten tree looking for grubs.

The coat on the black bear is long and shaggy and can range in color from brown to a golden color. The eyes and ears are small.

Black bears are curious animals. I once set out

a wildlife camera along a game trail at Wallace Falls State Park, where I work as a ranger. I knew that a bear was in the area after finding fresh broken ferns and black hair on a tree. After a week, I developed the film, and sure enough, the bear found the camera and stuck his face right into the lens, caught on camera like a famous pop star of the wilderness.

Some hikers fear the black bear and wear bells on their shoes and cowbells on their backpacks. Personally, I would find it distracting to hike a trail sounding

like jolly old Saint Nicholas. Talking or whistling can also do the trick. Though it rarely happens, bears can attack people if surprised or if they have bear cubs with them. The best way to handle this situation is to remain calm. Don't challenge the bear by standing in place. Walk slowly back in the direction you came and warn other hikers of the situation ahead.

Black bears mate in June or July and have two or three cubs in the winter months. The cubs spend the next winter together, then disperse the following spring.

Consider yourself a lucky hiker if you see this large, adaptable animal of the woods. It's a rare treat to see a wild bear in the wilderness. Be prepared and have your camera ready for a photo. ♦



Caught on film: A curious black bear checks out a a remote camera set at Wallace Falls State Park.

Photo by Ralph Radford

Ralph Radford

Ralph is a WTA member and a ranger at Wallace Falls State Park.