

Florida Black Bear

Ursus americanus floridanus

All wild bears in the state are Florida Black Bears, and while nearly identical in the field, the Florida Black Bear can be distinguished from other subspecies by its highly arched forehead and its long, narrow braincase.

They are normally black with a brown muzzle and may occasionally have a brownish tint to the fur along their spines.

Some people think that because body size of some Florida mammals such as raccoons and white-tailed deer is smaller compared to their northern counterparts that black bears in Florida are smaller than more northern bears. This is not true.

Adult male Florida Black Bears average around 350 pounds and adult females normally weigh around 175-200 pounds, both typical for northern black bears subspecies. The state record for a Florida Black Bear, at 624 pounds, was an 8-year old male bear that was struck and killed by a vehicle in December, 1988, here in Collier County.

The weight of individuals varies greatly throughout the year. Food availability is low during the winter months, even in Florida, and both male and female bears lose weight. As the summer breeding season ends and fall begins, both genders focus on putting on weight and they spend a lot of time eating.

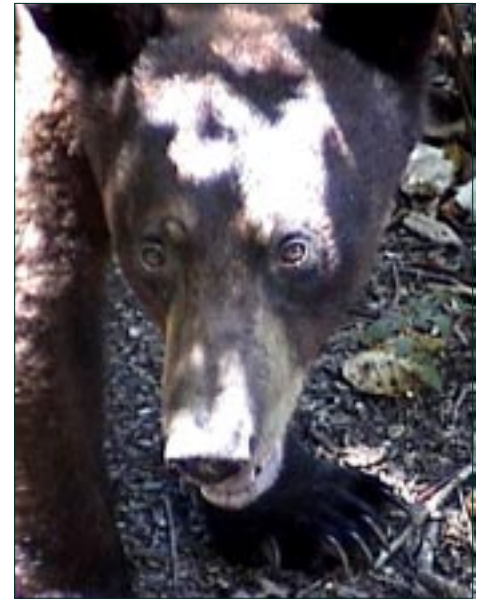
Male bears may stay active and eating all winter. Being big and fat allows males to get through the winter and dominate other bears, and being in good condition through the spring allows them to spend more time searching for mates and less time eating.

Females that put on a lot of weight are in better condition to feed cubs at the den site all winter, or to recover from poor body condition from nursing cubs the year before. Bears can gain or lose over a 100 pounds during one year.

Bears are omnivores, eating mostly acorns, nuts, berries, and other vegetation, as well as insects. A small percent-



A yearling approaches the Bunting House. It turned back when it heard people on the boardwalk (July, 2004).



A female with a nearby cub watches the boardwalk near the beginning of the shortcut trail (May, 2002).

age of their diet is meat, often from scavenging. The Florida Wildlife Commission has compiled a long list of items that Florida bears are known to eat (<http://myfwc.com/bear/foodlist.htm>).

Bears are solitary by nature unless it is the mating season or they have cubs. In general, they are not territorial and do not defend a specific area from intrusion by other bears. Instead of a territory, the area they wander in search of food, water and adequate cover is called a home range. Its size may vary each

season and year depending on food availability, the sex, age, and reproductive status of the bear, and population density. In Florida, male bears typically have home ranges of 50 to 120 square miles; female ranges generally are 10 to 25 square miles.

Black bears have decent eyesight, possibly as good as humans, and recent research has found that they have color vision. They have acute hearing and an excellent sense of smell.

The myth of poor vision may be due to their reliance on their sense of smell,

as well as behavior. When black bears see humans, they often do a lot of sniffing, and may stand up. This is not a sign of aggression; it helps them to catch scent and to get a better look.

Bears are quiet creatures, but occasionally they make sounds to communicate. Cubs bawl and moan when distressed, and make a sort of grunting purr when suckling. A sow communicates with her young by grunts or moans, sending the cubs up trees for safety or indicating that they should follow her.



A male sashes through the pond cypress near the exit trail (July, 2006).

An aggressive bear does not growl like a dog. Instead, it will stare, protrude its lower lip, and flatten its ears. If the source of the unease remains, it may slap the ground, huff, or snap its jaws. If these behaviors don't work, the bear may charge.

To avoid confrontations with bears, think of them as extremely large, powerful dogs. Don't make eye contact, and don't run. If it's a single bear, wave your arms and make noise. If it doesn't retreat, *slowly* walk away without looking at it or turning your back to it.