

## The Black Bear in Our Forest

An estimated 60,000 black bears (*Ursus americanus*) live in Quebec's forests, from the US border to Ungava Bay. The large forested expanses of the Appalachian corridor provide an essential habitat for this animal, where it can live without being disturbed by human activities.

### Habitat

The black bear is very opportunistic and enjoys a variety of habitats. But most black bears live in mixed forests of conifers and hardwoods. They are frequently seen near brooks, rivers or lakes as well as near wetlands. When autumn arrives and the temperatures begin to cool, bears begin seeking a den for the winter. They will generally use an old tree root, a downed tree trunk, or a shelter under a rock.



Black bear (*Ursus americanus*)  
Photo : <http://www.cpaws.org/>

### Distinctive Characteristics

In general the black bear has a black coat and a brownish muzzle. It often has a white spot on its chest. Sometimes bears with a brown or cinnamon coloured coat are seen, particularly in northwestern Quebec. The black bear has a stocky build, appearing heavier than it is. An adult male (age 4 +) generally weighs around 87 kg, while the female has an average weight of 57 kg. Bears don't have very good vision, but excellent hearing and a remarkable sense of smell make up for it. Very often the black bear stands on its hind legs in order to smell odors more effectively. Despite its heavyset appearance it is quite fast, and can attain a speed of 55 km/h for short distances. It is also an excellent swimmer.



Feeding sign on beech  
Photo : Clément Robidoux

### Diet

While its diet is composed primarily of vegetation, the black bear is omnivorous and eats nearly anything it can sink its teeth into. In the spring it will eat stems, buds, roots, small mammals and carrion. It's taste for the latter grows in relation to the state of decay. Some will attack the offspring of moose and deer. In the summer it will turn over logs or rocks or pick apart old roots in search of insects. It completes its menu with berries and honey, which it adores. In the fall it particularly likes acorns, hazelnuts and beech-nuts.

### Reproduction

The female reaches sexual maturity at the age of 4, 5 or 6 years, depending on its habitat, and may give birth every two years. Mating occurs during June or July, and birth takes place in January or February, during its winter sleep. At birth the newborns, measuring barely 20 cm, and weighing about 225 grams, are hairless, blind and undeveloped. On average two or three cubs are born each time. The cubs remain with their mother for about 16 months.



Bear mark on balsam fir  
Photo : Clément Robidoux

## **Behavior**

The black bear is an essentially solitary animal, except when the female is raising her young, or when there is an abundance of food in a given area. During the rut, adult males often resort to marking trees in order to signal their presence to rival males and potential partners. These may appear as scratches, bites or broken treetops. Apart from man, bears have few predators in our forests. Though the grey wolf, coyote and cougar may attack them.

## **Protecting the species and its habitat**

The primary cause of mortality in this species is certainly hunting. Males are usually the most affected because of their more audacious characters and the fact that they travel over a wide-ranging territory. Bear populations are also affected by poachers, who harvest certain parts of their bodies for their medicinal and aphrodisiac properties, such as the feet and gall bladder.

Fortunately those interested in protecting the black bear in their forests can do so easily. By maintaining the forest cover the landowner may ensure the preservation of its habitat. Some forest management may also encourage its presence, notably by clearing around large black cherry trees or Serviceberry trees in order to let in more light. This favors the production of cherries and berries that could attract bears. The landowner may also help the black bear by not cutting down mature beech trees which produce large quantities of beech-nuts.

## **Relations with humans**

Normally the black bear avoids humans. However, when there is a lack of food, it will approach inhabited areas more frequently. When we are in the woods, respecting a few basic rules can help reduce the risk of an undesirable encounter with a black bear, which likes nothing more than to avoid humans.

### **The 3 golden rules**

- Never feed the bears
- Minimize odors related to food and garbage
- Keep food and garbage out of their reach



*Black bear with cub – Photo : Daniel J. Cox/naturalexposures.com*

If despite this you meet up with a black bear, above all do not approach it. Back away slowly without running, while keeping your eye on it. You can signal your presence by making noise or speaking in a calm voice. Do not appear aggressive, because you do not want it to feel threatened. If you are with young children, take them in your arms. Try to look as large as possible by raising your arms or opening your coat. At all times, you must leave the bear with an escape route.

## **Sources**

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*The Appalachian Corridor is a conservation organization which pursues, in collaboration with Nature Conservancy Quebec and local conservation organizations, the development of a transborder conservation strategy for the protection of a natural corridor spanning from the Green Mountains of Vermont to Orford Mountain via the Sutton Mountains in the Eastern Townships. The Ruitter Valley Land Trust, the Parc d'environnement naturel de Sutton, the Mount Pinnacle Land Trust, the Alderbrooke Marsh Land Trust, the Memphremagog Wetlands Foundation, and the Sentiers de l'Estrée are among the partners who support the global vision proposed by the ACA. Its activities are financed by, among others, by Government of Canada's Habitat Stewardship Program for Species at Risk and private foundations.*

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