

Get Wild: A bear's life

Frances Hartogh



A black bear hangs in a tree looking down on crowds along French Street Aug. 6, 2018, in Breckenridge. Many bears are entering a period of hyperphagia, where their daily food intake averages between 15,000 and 20,000 calories.

Hugh Carey / hcarey@summitdaily.com

In this first of a four-part series on a year in the life of our largest wildlife neighbor, the American black bear (*Ursus americanus*), we'll introduce you to some spellbinding aspects of a black bear's life.

Smell is a bear's strongest sense — their amazing noses can pick up scents from well over a mile away. In fact, they have the best sense of smell of any North American land mammal, about seven times better than a bloodhound's and over 2,000 times better than ours!

Black bears are intelligent, curious and highly resourceful. With minimal human pressure, and adequate food and water, black bears can live up to 30 years in their natural habitat of aspen and oak with native fruit sources like chokecherry and serviceberry.

For the bears, black is a species, not a color. Colorado's black bears may come in blonde, brown and cinnamon, and their fur can also bleach lighter with prolonged sun exposure.

Colorado's bears weigh in around 275 pounds for males (boars) and 175 pounds for females (sows). Their thick, multi-layered fur makes them look even bigger. But don't let their size fool you — black bears can run 40 mph!

Black bears have 42 teeth: 10 molars, 16 premolars, four canines and 12 incisors, all highly specialized to handle their omnivorous diet. Despite their impressive canines, which can be almost 3 inches long, over 90% of a black bear's natural diet consists of grasses, berries, fruits, nuts and plants, with the rest being mainly insects and scavenged carcasses. Bears may also hunt small animals and the young of larger ones.

Right now, our black bear neighbors are hungry! During spring and summer, their calorie needs average a "mere" 5,000-8,000 calories per day. As September rolls around, bears enter hyperphagia, and their daily intake averages between 15,000 and 20,000 calories (equal to over 35 Big Macs). Feeding up to 20 hours, bears gain 2-4 pounds of fat daily to build up enough reserves to survive winter.

Black bears mate between May and July. But egg implantation happens when sows have fattened up and enter their dens for winter.

As natural food sources dwindle around November, bears move into dens. Black bear hibernation, sometimes called torpor, differs from deep-sleep hibernation that animals like bats, ground squirrels and marmots undergo. In torpor, a black bear's metabolism slows significantly to greatly decrease need for sustenance, but a bear may still wake up to eat, care for young and defend its den. To learn more, look for the second in this series in December: "What's happening in that den?"

Black bears' natural inclination is to avoid humans. But as people move into bear habitat, conflicts occur. Sadly, Colorado Parks & Wildlife officers euthanize over 100 problem bears annually.

Help protect our black bear neighbors by removing attractants:

Use bear-proof trash containers. Never place trash out the night before pickup.

Don't put out food for wildlife that attracts bears.

Secure pets and pet food.

Remove bird feeders during months bears are active. At the very least, bring feeders in at night and if bears are in area.

Clean barbecues.

Lock bear-accessible windows and doors.

Remove food, trash and air fresheners from your vehicle — and lock it up.

Remove ripe and fallen fruit from your property.

If a bear approaches your home, make noise to chase it away.

Leash pets when hiking or camping. Store food and smellable items in bear-proof containers away from tents.

Some local towns like [Breckenridge](#) have regulations and guidelines for protecting bears from becoming “problem bears.”

have regulations and guidelines for protecting bears from

Let's work together to keep our amazing black bears alive and wild!





Frances Hartogh

Frances Hartogh/Courtesy photo

“Get Wild” publishes on Fridays in the Summit Daily News. Frances Hartogh is a Volunteer Wilderness Ranger for the [Eagle-](#)

[Summit Wilderness Alliance](#)