

Black Bear

By Dr. Vince Crichton

Black bear (*Ursus americanus*) are the most common and widely distributed of the three ursids (black, grizzly and polar) found in North America. Their historical range covered the forested areas of North America, including Mexico. Although the distribution has declined substantially since European settlement, the species is still common in Alaska, Canada, the western conterminous United States and parts of the eastern U.S. The estimated number for all of North America is 400,000-500,000. At present, black bear enjoy the most secure status of any of the large carnivores in Canada and are abundant and broadly distributed in Manitoba.

Black bear habitat is characterized by relatively inaccessible terrain, thick under storey vegetation and abundant sources of food. Forest cover in association with food availability are primary components determining suitable habitat for black bear. They favour the aspen parkland and the boreal forested region of Manitoba although they are found on occasion as far north as the boundary with the Northwest Territories and on the Hudson Bay Coast.

Bears exhibit seasonal shifts in habitat use, exploiting emerging green vegetation and different crops such as berries and mast crops as they come into season. They prey on ungulates, especially calves of moose and elk and in some areas have been known to remove over 75% of the annual moose calf crop. There are records of black bears killing adult moose.

Manitoba's black bears are unique in that there is a great variation in colour. In the eastern portion of the province the black colour phase is predominant. In the Interlake and west although concrete data are not available it is estimated that colours other than black may account for close to 50% of the populations. These vary from blond with chocolate brown faces to chocolate to cinnamon.

How heavy are black bears? A large male captured in Riding Mountain National Park on June 25, 1987 weighed 430 pounds and was fitted with a radio transmitter. On September 9, 1987, 65 days after the initial capture this bear was again captured and weighed 803 pounds for a weight gain of 5 pounds per day. This weight represents a world record for black bears.

Black bear use home ranges of variable size, depending on environmental conditions and behavioural factors associated with their sex and age. Research work done suggests that home ranges can vary from as small as 20 km² to over 230 km². In addition, concentrated sources of food may result in site specific bear densities much higher than indicated by estimates of home range size. How many bears exist in Manitoba? They are a difficult species to census and a detailed census has never been conducted in Manitoba. If one uses densities generated in other jurisdictions it is suggested that the population may range from 40,000 to 50,000.

The main cause of black bear mortality appears to be hunting, although complete mortality data are unavailable and figures for hunting mortality are only estimates. Populations of black bear can exist surprisingly well in the presence of development. However, in most cases populations eventually succumb to the intolerances of humans. This often occurs when bears are displaced from the security of undisturbed refuges (by development) or encouraged to forage on foods in human occupied sites. The result is increased mortality rates as a consequence of management actions taken to prevent conflict with humans.

The maximum sustainable mortality rate for black bear is estimated to be 16-23% of the adult population per year.

A major threat to black bears is the loss of secure habitat and the resulting increased contact with tourists and their garbage. This usually results in human-habituated bears, which are dealt with by removal to another area or killing. Obstructions to movements consist of physical impediments, sensory impediments and the loss of forest cover in travel corridors and in adjacent areas.

The key to conserving black bear populations is the protection of prime habitat, strict garbage control and minimizing human contact. In areas of development additional site specific measures might include, but not be limited to, such things as closure of ski and hiking trails in spring when bears are emerging from dens, mandatory garbage control and most importantly public education.