



## Black Bears



Sometime during the late 1980s, a female black bear from the Sierra del Carmen in Mexico started a journey. She descended from the mountains, crossed miles of desert, swam across the Rio Grande, and traversed more desert to reach the wooded slopes of the Chisos Mountains in Big Bend National Park. This natural return of black bears is one of the great success stories of Big Bend. Seeing a black bear in the wild is an unforgettable experience. About 200 visitors see bears in Big Bend National Park each year, mostly from a distance. Read this brochure to learn more about the black bears of Big Bend National Park and how to safely share their habitat.

### The Past

In the early 1900s, black bears (*Ursus americanus*) were common in the higher elevations of what is now Big Bend National Park. In 1901, biologist Vernon Bailey described bears as being "...common in the upper canyons of the Chisos Mountains, where fresh tracks of old and young were frequently seen and where there was an abundance of old 'sign' and turned over stones." Bears continued to be common in the Chisos through the 1930s.

By the time Big Bend National Park was established in 1944, however, there were virtually no resident bears in the area. Shooting and trapping

by ranchers, federal predator control agents, and recreational hunters, and the loss of habitat due to settlement and development contributed to their decline. Individual bears occasionally wandered in and out of the park from nearby Mexico, but only scattered sightings were reported from the 1940s through the 1980s.

Then, in 1989, a park visitor photographed a female bear with three young cubs in the Chisos Mountains, providing proof that black bears had once again settled in the park. The bears were back, and they had returned unaided by humans!

### Bear Ecology

Although bears are seen throughout the park, most of them prefer the Chisos Mountains, where they find food, water, shelter, and cooler temperatures. Some bears, especially males and non-breeding females, live in the low desert year-round, where they find abundant food in vegetated arroyos and water at desert springs or along the Rio Grande.

Although black bears are omnivorous, they feed

primarily on vegetation. Favorite foods include pinyon nuts, acorns, and madrone, juniper, and sumac berries, as well as persimmon and prickly pear fruit, sotol and yucca. Bears will also consume insects and carrion, and may occasionally prey upon javelina and deer. During most of the year, a bear eats about as much as a human of similar size and activity level would eat. During the fall, however, black bears may consume up to 13,000 calories a day as they prepare for winter.

### Bears Through the Seasons

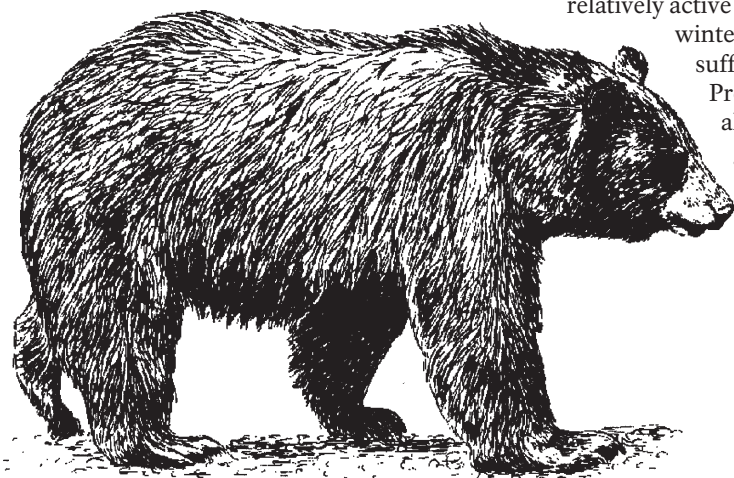
Black bears in Big Bend do not enter a true hibernation. Due to the mild climate and good food availability in Big Bend National Park, black bears here are dormant for just three to four months each year. Their winter activity varies from year to year, and depends upon food supply.

Males and non-pregnant females may remain relatively active throughout the winter if they can find sufficient food.

Pregnant females will always enter dens to give birth.

When the bears den for winter, their metabolism slows and they spend time resting in dens or surface beds. However, they are awake much of the time, and will periodically emerge to find food.

Black bears mate during the summer months. Cubs are born in February and stay in the den with their mother until April. At birth, the cubs weigh less than one pound, but they will gain approximately 30 pounds during the first summer. A healthy adult bear can weigh between 200 and 400 pounds and stand five to six feet tall.



## If You See A Bear...

- Remain calm! Enjoy the sighting. Most visitors never get the chance to see a black bear.
- Keep a safe distance (100yds or more).
- If it approaches, scare it away by shouting or throwing stones or sticks towards it.
- Report your sighting to a park ranger.

## Black Bear Research



Weighing a cub

Researchers estimate that the habitat in the park may be able to support about 30 black bears. Like all wild animal populations, Big Bend's bear population fluctuates, changing from year to year in response to food availability, which in turn is dependent upon weather and other factors.

Although black bears have inhabited the park since the late 1980's, there is still much we do not know about them. In order to properly manage the park to protect black bears and their habitat, park

managers need to know more about the bears' feeding requirements, home ranges, travel and migration patterns, denning habits, and genetics. Beginning in 1998, researchers began studying the bears of Big Bend, putting radio tracking collars on many of them to follow their movements. Results so far have greatly expanded previous knowledge about Big Bend black bear ecology.

### Thus far, black bear research in Big Bend has yielded the following information:

Inadequate food availability in the Chisos Mountains may cause the bears to make long-distance migrations to search for food.

Bears may den in natural caves, or they may excavate holes for dens.

Water sources are critical for bear survival, and require protection to allow bear use without disturbance.



Male bears regularly migrate between mountain ranges as part of their natural dispersal.

Females normally have 2-3 cubs, but reproduction is heavily influenced by food availability.

The bears are currently genetically diverse, but still represent a limited gene pool due to the small population size. Monitoring bear genetics to watch for inbreeding problems is important.

## Visiting Black Bear Country



In order for the bear population to thrive and for people to remain safe, it is vital that visitors do their part to prevent negative encounters between themselves and bears. Bears that eat human food easily become dependent on it. Once bears begin

associating humans with food, they seek out humans and their food and become aggressive.

*Dangerous bears may have to be killed.*

### Please help us keep Big Bend's black bears healthy, wild, and safe!



#### **In the Chisos Basin Campground and parking areas:**

- Store all food, trash, toiletries, and other scented items in a hard-sided vehicle or in a bear-proof storage locker, night and day.
- Never leave food in the bed of a pickup. Lock it in the cab with the windows up and the doors locked.
- Never leave food or coolers out and unattended, even for a few minutes.



#### **In the Chisos backcountry:**

- When hiking, never leave packs or food unattended.
- Store all food, trash, toiletry items, and cooking gear in the bear-proof storage box at your campsite.
- Never take food inside your tent.
- Pick up all trash, especially food scraps, from your campsite and pack it out.



#### **In backcountry roadside campsites and other campgrounds:**

- Store all food, trash, and toiletry items in a hard-sided vehicle or food-storage locker.
- Keep a clean campsite and pack out all trash, especially food scraps.



#### **At the Chisos Mountains Lodge:**

- Put all food and coolers inside your hotel room.
- Do not leave food or coolers on porches or balconies.

**It is illegal to feed any wildlife in Big Bend National Park.  
Never allow a bear to get any of your food or trash.  
Help us keep the *WILD* in wildlife.**

