



## 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 report seeing a bear in Big Bend National Park each year, mostly from a distance.

### 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." It would not be long, however, before the bear population would begin to decline.

Shooting and trapping by ranchers, federal predator control agents, and recreational hunters in combination with loss of habitat that resulted from settlement and development that continued into the late 1930s and early 1940s doomed the black bears of the Big Bend area.

By the time Big Bend National Park was established in 1944, there were virtually no resident bears in the Big Bend area or anywhere else in West Texas. Throughout the 1940s and extending through the 1980s, however, visitors would occasionally report seeing a black bear, likely a bear that had wandered into the park from nearby Mexico.

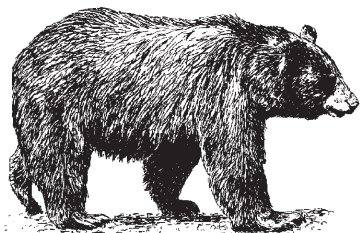
Then, in 1989, a visitor photographed a female bear with three young cubs in the Chisos Mountains, providing proof that black bears had returned to the park. In 1990, 77 visitors filed a report indicating black bear as the species observed! The bears were back, and they had returned without human intervention.

### Habits and habitats

Although bears are observed occasionally in the low desert and riparian areas of the park, studies indicate they are mainly restricted to the Chisos Mountains and foothills, where they find abundant food, water, shelter, and cooler temperatures. Some bears, especially males and non-breeding females may live in the low desert year-round, where they can locate food and water in arroyos, around desert springs, or along the Rio Grande.

Black bears are considered to be omnivorous, but their diet has been found to be mainly vegetative matter. Favorite foods include acorns, pinyon nuts, madrone, juniper, and sumac berries, sotol hearts, persimmon and cactus fruits, and grasses. Bears will also consume insects, carrion, and may occasionally prey upon deer and javelina. During late fall, bears may accelerate their daily food intake as they prepare for winter.

### 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 (100 yards or more).



If it approaches, scare it away by shouting or throwing stones or sticks towards it.



Report your sighting to a park ranger.

## Bears through the seasons

Like all black bears in North America, Big Bend's bears do not enter a state of true hibernation. Because of the relatively mild climate and normally adequate food availability during Big Bend's winter months, black bears here are dormant for shorter periods of time than are bears found in areas of more severe winter climate. A bear's winter activity varies from year to year and depends upon food availability. 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 300 pounds and stand five to six feet tall.

## Black bear research

Researchers estimate that the habitat in the park may be able to support about 20 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 1980s, 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. From 1988 through 2001 researchers studied the bears of Big Bend, putting radio tracking collars on many of them to follow their movements. Results of the studies 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 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 with 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.

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.

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 High 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.