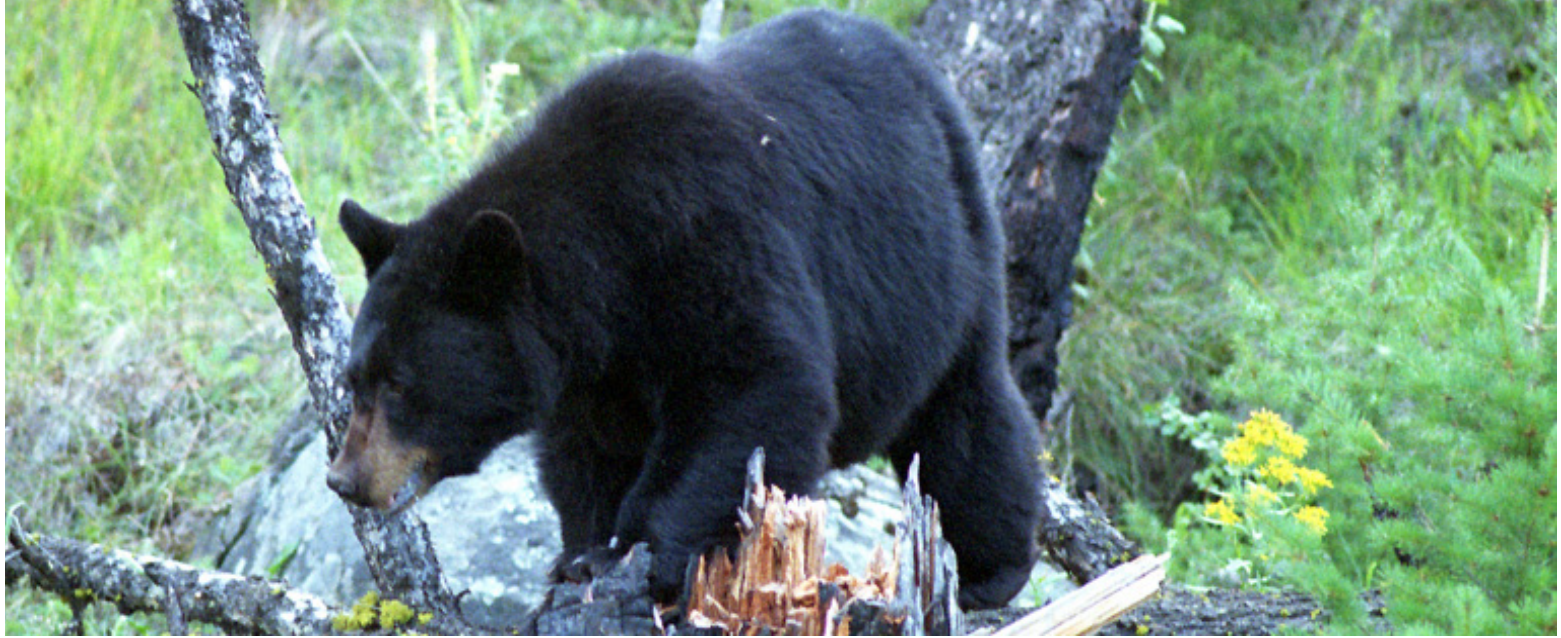




Black Bears in the Big South Fork



Historically, black bears were found throughout the Cumberland Plateau. However, through habitat changes caused by human activity black bear were all but eliminated from their historic range.

In the mid-1990's 14 female black bear were released in the Big South Fork area. Captured in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, the bears were fitted with radio collars and placed in remote areas of the Big South Fork. While not all bears remained, many did establish home ranges in and around Big South Fork. Today, due to successful breeding and the in-migration of additional bear, population levels in the area are estimated to be in the range of 40 – 50 bear.

Bear Behavior and Biology

Black bears are secretive and shy creatures and are instinctively fearful of humans. Normally, they have no desire to interact with people. Bears are opportunistic feeders and will eat what is easily and readily available. Their primary foods are berries, nuts, acorns, fruits, grasses and occasionally meat or carrion.

Adult black bear in the Big South Fork area weigh between 75-250 pounds. They vary in height when standing on their rear legs, but will rarely reach six feet tall. They are reclusive and prefer to be alone except during breeding season or when they have cub.

Breeding takes place during the summer. Cubs are born during the following winter. This is a phenomenon known as “delayed implantation.” The female does not become pregnant until her body has gained enough weight to get her and the newborn cubs through the winter. If the female is under stress or fails to gain sufficient body weight, the mother may reabsorb the embryos. The gestation period lasts for six weeks. The cubs are born in the den and are quiet helpless for the first three months.

If You Meet a Bear

In the event you see a bear in the backcountry, do not become alarmed. If the animal is foraging for natural food, simply stand as still and quiet as possible, and take advantage of a rare opportunity. Do not approach the bear, or throw food to the bear.

If, however, the bear comes into your campsite, take a different approach. Any loud noise will most likely run the bear off, clanging pots and pans together, blowing a horn, and yelling would be appropriate actions. Do not allow the bear the opportunity to get your food. Should the

bear become aggressive, or if it does not depart after your attempts, leave the area and report the incident to a Park Service employee immediately.

Black bears have a keen sense of smell and in most cases will smell you long before you ever see it and will leave the area. If you are horseback riding, generally the noise of the horses will scare the bear away long before it is ever seen.

Food Storage

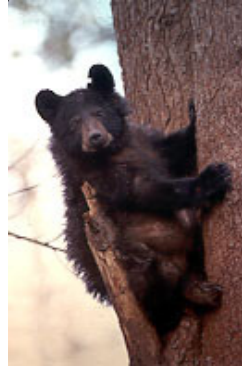
Bears that get habituated to human food are generally the ones that cause trouble. This occurs when humans leave food, food scraps, or garbage available to them. Instead of foraging normally for food, they learn to associate human scent with a food opportunity.

It is important that food is kept properly stored in backcountry sites as well as developed campgrounds. This limits the human food opportunities available to bears and encourages them to forage for food naturally.

In the Backcountry

If camping in the backcountry, use the standard method of hanging your backpacks and food sacks. Find two trees approximately 30 feet apart with limbs 15 – 20 feet above the ground. Throw a rope across the limbs, and allow enough slack to attach your packs. Once the packs are secured to the rope, pull the rope tight and the pack should stabilize high enough where a bear cannot reach it. The packs should be in the center of the two trees in case the bear tries to climb the tree and reach for the packs.

Any food not in use should be stored in this manner while in the backcountry. Do not sleep in clothes you have cooked in, as the food odor is left on your clothes and may attract a bear. It is also a good idea to cook some distance from your sleeping area. Plan your meals carefully so that you do not have excess food left over.



In Developed Areas

If camping near your vehicle or in a developed area such as a campground, place coolers, grills, cooking utensils, horse feed, any food not in use, and anything with food odors inside the locked compartment of a vehicle or trailer. Wipe off picnic tables, grills, and discard aluminum foil used for cooking. Avoid burning garbage in fire rings because it will leave behind grease and food scrapes. Always discard all garbage in designated canisters. Keep a clean campsite.

We want to prevent nuisance behavior by bears. By following these precautions we can hopefully prevent any bear from being poached or hit by a car. It will also prevent negative bear-human interactions. With your help we can keep Big South Fork's bears wild.