

Living With Wildlife- Black Bears

By Kate MacNeil

Education Coordinator, Ottawa-Carleton Wildlife Centre – www.wildlifeinfo.ca

I used to live in Northwestern Ontario, near Thunder Bay. To say it is remote would be an understatement so it is not surprising that if you left your garbage out it was just as likely a black bear (*Ursus americanus*) would have it for a snack as a raccoon.

While the bear population in the areas surrounding Ottawa is not nearly as significant as in Northwestern Ontario it does exist. At the Wildlife Centre we had two occasions when bear cubs came in, and both were found near the Ottawa River, not far from the Parkway. We also would receive calls about bears exploring rural and semi-rural yards during hot, dry summers, when food was scarce.

Bears are smart and have good long-term memory. This is key as they travel great distances to find food so learning and remembering where to find food is very valuable. This is also why it is important to remove any food sources that may lead bears to learn that human interaction equals food.

In the fall bears become hyperphagic, which means they become even more focused on food as they have to gain enough weight to sustain themselves through winter denning. During this time they can consume upwards of 20,000 calories per day. That is equal to the calories in 35 Big Macs!

Big Macs aside, black bears eat a wide range of foods, both vegetation and meat. Although they eat high calorie foods such as fish and mammals, food availability means plant matter makes up between 75-90% of their diet. This includes berries, fruit, roots and nuts. I once saw a black bear spend almost an hour picking bugs from a decaying log. It is amazing to think how many bugs it would take to make a dent in its appetite.

Females give birth to cubs while in the winter den, which can be located in a cave, or in a hole under a log or under the roots of a tree. Cubs remain in the cozy den that is lined with leaves or other vegetation until the spring when they emerge with mom. When born cubs are very small relative to their size at adulthood. At birth they weigh about 250 grams, which is roughly double what a newborn kitten would weigh. This is amazing when you think of the size difference between an adult cat and an adult bear.

The young spend the next winter with their mother and then disperse the following spring.

For more information about wildlife check out www.wildlifeinfo.ca.