



Black Bears



Some time during the late 1980s, a female black bear from the Sierra del Carmen in northern 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 forested slopes of the Chisos Mountains in Big Bend National Park. Researchers do not know exactly why black bears returned, but it is due in part to the preservation and restoration of habitat in the park.

The Past

In the early 1900s, black bears (*Ursus americanus*) were a common sight in the Chisos Mountains of western Texas. 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 began to decline.

By the time Big Bend National Park was established in 1944, there were virtually no resident bears in the Big Bend area. Shooting and trapping by ranchers, federal predator control agents, and recreational hunters, as well as loss of habitat due to development, contributed to their decline. Individual bears occasionally wandered in and out of the park from Mexico, but only scattered sightings were reported from the 1940s through the 1980s. In 1969, and again in 1978, female bears with cubs were seen in the Chisos Mountains. Still, bears were extremely rare in the park.

Return of the Black Bear

Once a large animal is eliminated from its natural range, it is rare for it to return on its own. But the late 1980s brought an amazing turn of events. In 1988, a visitor photographed a female with three young cubs in the Chisos Mountains. On 27 occasions, visitors reported seeing bears that year, further evidence of a resident black bear population. Observations increased in the 1990s, with 572 sightings in 1996, and 343 sightings in 1999. The recolonization of black bears in Big Bend is a remarkable natural event.

Although bears are occasionally seen 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.

Bear Behavior

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

Black bears do not enter true hibernation in Big Bend. Due to the area’s mild climate and the availability of food, black bears are dormant for only three to four months

(January–March) each year. When their metabolism slows during the winter months, they spend time resting in dens or surface beds. However, they are awake much of the time and may periodically emerge to forage.

Black bears mate during the summer, so some female bears are pregnant throughout the fall and early winter. Cubs are born in February and stay in the den with their mother until April. The cubs weigh less than one pound at birth and gain approximately 30 pounds during the first summer. A healthy adult bear in Big Bend can weigh 200-400 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 20-30 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 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

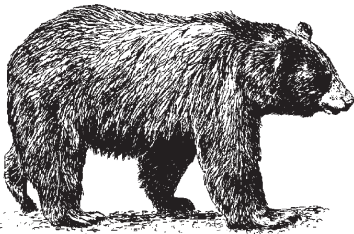
In backcountry roadside campsites and other campgrounds:

- 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

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)



Don’t run and don’t turn away from the bear



Stand together, make yourself look big, and continue to watch the bear



If your presence causes the bear to change its behavior (stops feeding, changes its travel direction), you are too close



Increase the distance between you and the bear. The bear will probably do the same



If it approaches, scare it away by shouting, clapping your hand, or throwing stones or sticks in its general direction



Report your sighting to a park ranger