



Article Margie Manthey & Photo by Tammy Nash and published in the Westport Review Mirror, 2020



**Summertime finds black bear mothers teaching their cubs about good eats and where to find them.** The scant spring menu of catkins, roots, grass and carrion has been upgraded to a cornucopia of flowers, ants and their pupae, bees, yellow jackets, invertebrates, fish, nestling birds, small mammals and the occasional fawn or moose calf. Nursing females can finally reverse the weight loss that began during hibernation and continued throughout spring. The highlight of the season's gastronomic delights for black bears is what is known as 'soft mast' – that is, berry and fruit crops like blackberries, blueberries, pin cherries, raspberries, dogwood fruits, apples, etc. In good years, there will be an abundance of soft mast for bears; in those times, they often binge on the delectable fruits for days, even within sight of one another.

Mothers with small cubs frequently select large 'babysitter' trees, preferably big white pines, as safe places to leave their babes while they forage. The cubs sleep among the lofty branches and play around the trunk, ready to climb back to safety at any sign of danger. Unlike grizzly bears, black bear mothers rarely attack humans that cross paths with their cubs. They may stomp, snort, or make a mock charge, but most of the time, they simply run away. Nevertheless, during hikes it is wise to make noise by talking or singing to avoid surprise confrontations, and keep dogs leashed.

Black bears mate in early summer. Females with new cubs will not breed until the following year; but those with year-old cubs are anxious to breed again, and they begin to reject their offspring. It is a distressing, confusing time for the yearlings who have always relied on their mothers for food, protection, guidance, play and comfort. They hibernated as a cohesive family unit all winter, finally emerging to greet the cubs' second spring. Now, however, with summer's arrival, the sweet maternal bond turns sour. Growing increasingly impatient with their youngsters' presence, the mother bears begin to run them off. After receiving repeated hostilities, the pathetic cubs catch the clue and dejectedly wander off alone. They are frightened and unsure of themselves. Sometimes, sibling cubs stay together for a little while before parting company. This pitiful situation tugs at our human heartstrings, but the juveniles are now ready to take care of themselves, having gotten a thorough education from their mothers on how to be bears. Dispersing female yearlings try to set up territories near their mother, while young males are forced to wander further, seeking safer territories not claimed by older, larger males. Therefore, we see more bears this time of year, many being the displaced, forlorn juveniles that just got the boot. They are easily scared off by loud noises, should they wander into your yard.

During the breeding season, male bears shadow prospective females, waiting for receptive signals. When a male wards off competition, a fight may ensue. Such efforts to gain exclusive rights to mate may be for naught as female black bears readily mate with other males, resulting in a litter with different fathers. Bred females undergo delayed implantation – the fertilized eggs will not implant and start to develop until the bears den up in November for hibernation.

The remainder of the summer will find black bears eating all they can to increase fat stores. Never feed bears and prevent access to garbage and pet / livestock food. Take down birdfeeders until the snow flies. Remember: bears that score food rewards will return looking for more.

*Margie is a self-proclaimed nature nerd with a passion for all things finned, furred and feathered...even the creepy-crawly-scaly kinds. She's summured on Wolfe Lake since childhood and loves sharing what she learns about our wild things. Photo by Tammy Nash*