



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



Black Bears: Season's Eatings This is the last article in a 3-part series that has focused on black bears, particularly their seasonal behaviours.

By autumn, black bears enter a state of insatiable hunger and thirst called *hyperphagia* that finds them foraging up to 20 hours a day. They will increase their body weight by 35 per cent and pack on 100 pounds within a few weeks. In spring and summer, bears consume around 5,000 calories daily; but in fall, they take in 20,000 calories or more each day! This manic compulsion to eat is driven by a biological necessity to fatten up before hibernation, during which they will go without any food or water for months. Having thick layers of fat prior to hibernation greatly improves reproductive success and survival. If they fail to gain enough weight beforehand, females will not produce cubs and some bears may die over the winter.

In the fall, black bears seek out lingering *soft mast* foods like apples, mountain ash berries and dogwood berries, as well as the season's crop of *hard mast* -- high-calorie acorns, pine nuts, hazelnuts and beechnuts. Additionally, insects, rodents, carrion, clover and any other opportunistically gleaned entrées remain on the autumnal menu. When natural food sources fail to meet their caloric requirements, bears may wander over 100 km looking for sustenance, taking them outside of their usual range and across dangerous highways. Hungry, sleep-deprived bears may also be more willing to venture into human spaces like campgrounds or backyards.

Black bears have a remarkable sense of smell, possibly the most sensitive in the animal kingdom. Their large noses are highly developed with hundreds of times more surface area and receptors than ours. Bears collect and process vast amounts of olfactory news from their environment. Whiffs promising good eats can bring them in from several kilometers away. Fallen apples, grilling meats, fish entrails, week-old garbage...all produce tantalizing aromas that beckon hungry bears. To avoid potential conflicts this season, take precautions to minimize bear attractants. Clean your BBQ grill and empty its grease trap; safely store and secure fuels and garbage; avoid feeding pets outdoors; remove birdfeeders until winter; protect poultry and beehives with hotwire; and keep doors and windows closed and locked at night or when you are out. Campers should use bear-resistant food canisters or hang provisions from a tree and realize that scented toiletries can attract bears, too. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, especially when the "cure" can weigh up to 600 pounds. Please: NEVER feed bears. It creates problematic, emboldened animals that lose their natural fear of humans; and when bears are perceived as threats to human safety, most wind up dead – literally killed with kindness by the hand that fed them.

As winter approaches, black bears select dens inside rocky crevices, hollow trees and logs, under the root masses of trees or beneath excavated mounds of earth. Throughout hibernation they survive on stored fat. Respiration slows, and their heart rate drops from 40-50 beats per minute to around 8 beats per minute. They can still rouse quickly, however, as their body temperature does not drop very much. Female bears impregnated over the summer and in good body condition undergo delayed implantation between November and December. Two months later - - during hibernation -- the tiny cubs are born, each weighing less than 330 gms / 3/4 lbs. Although they are blind, deaf and uncoordinated, their mother's high-fat milk promotes rapid growth. In the spring, the new family emerges from the den, and the search for good eats starts anew.

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