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Of the three species of bears inhabiting North America, the black bear is the smallest and most widespread. With plenty of woodlands nearby, bear sightings are not altogether rare around Westport, particularly at certain times of the year. In this article, we will discuss black bear basics, including their spring and summer behaviours.

Black bears are powerful, heavy-boned animals with adult males averaging between 120–300 kg / 250–650 lbs. Females are smaller, typically weighing between 45-180 kg / 100-400 lbs. Their name is somewhat misleading, as black bears come in several other colours, including brown, blonde, cinnamon, grey and even white. In fact, this species exhibits more colour variation than any other mammal in North America. Colours vary by region, which biologists believe helps the bears to blend in with their habitats. In our region, where there are more densely shaded woodlands, they are generally black. Those inhabiting more open, sun-soaked areas tend to have lighter-coloured fur. Black bears appear sluggish and slow as they lumber along. However, they are surprisingly fast and athletic, with an ability to sprint up to 56 km / 35 mph and scale a 100 foot tree in just 30 seconds. They are excellent swimmers. Their extraordinary sense of smell is seven times greater than that of a bloodhound and can be measured in miles. They have eyesight comparable to ours, except their night vision is quite sharp.

Black bears can lose 15-25% of their body weight during hibernation, and lactating mothers may lose up to 40%. Now that spring is here, bears are out and about looking for food. Although they are omnivores – eating both plants and animals – plants make up the majority of their diet. Bears eat whatever the season offers. In the spring, they are huge grazers, feeding on catkins, grasses, clover, dandelions and leaves. Plants are most nutritious shortly after erupting, when they contain the most protein. Spawning suckers also provide protein; and being opportunistic feeders, bears eat carrion, too. At best, the bears will simply maintain their weight throughout spring. As spring edges into summer, black bears begin to feast on berry crops, insects, small mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians. Less frequently, they may eat fawns and moose calves; but targeting calves is risky, as mother moose aggressively defend their young.

Right now, mother black bears are busy feeding and protecting their cubs from predators like bobcats, coyotes, domestic dogs and other bears. Cubs are completely dependent on their mothers for care and to teach them survival skills. They remain with their mothers for about 1-1/2 years. Studies on orphaned cubs suggests that they cannot survive on their own until roughly 6 months of age and are at high risk of perishing without the presence of their mothers. This fact is just one component contributing to the dismay of many at the recent decision to reinstate the Ontario spring bear hunt in 2021. One huge misconception surrounding black bears is that we are in great danger if we encounter a mother with her cubs. This is a myth. Unlike the ferocity of grizzly bear mothers, black bear mothers usually bluff or run away from people. During field studies, when cubs are routinely captured in trees, the researchers are not attacked by mother bears even while holding onto the squalling babies.

Look for an upcoming article on bear safety and another on fall/winter behaviours of the black bear. Meanwhile, if you have bear activity around your home, spring is a wise time to secure all garbage, remove bird feeders and feed pets indoors.

Article by Margie Manthey / Photo: Tammy Nash