

## The Bears of Yellowstone National Park

Welcome to Yellowstone National Park! Yellowstone is home to the largest concentration of mammals in the lower 48 states. In addition to having a wide variety of small animals, Yellowstone is notable for its large mammals, including eight hoofed species (bighorn sheep, bison, elk, moose, mountain goats, mule deer, pronghorn, and white-tailed deer) and seven predators (black bears, Canada lynx, coyotes, grizzly bears, mountain lions, wolverines, and wolves). Since the founding of Yellowstone National Park in 1872, its bears in particular have become the symbol of the park for many Americans.

### **Grizzly bears and black bears**

Yellowstone National Park is home to two species of bears: grizzly bears and black bears. Of the two species, black bears have a much larger range across the United States. The grizzly bear is typically bigger than the black bear and its defining features: a large muscle above the shoulders and a concave, or curved, face, make it easily distinguishable from the black bear. Grizzly's aggressive reputation is also in contrast to the black bear's, and has made it infamous among park visitors. With a high rump, or hindquarters, a straight face, and significantly smaller size, the black bears of Yellowstone are instantly recognizable. Despite their name, black bears, like grizzly bears, show great variation in color. While about 50% of black bears at Yellowstone are black in color, others are brown, blond, or cinnamon.

### **Diet**

The grizzly and black bears of Yellowstone are omnivores, eating a diet of both plants and meat. While black bears typically prefer to search food in the forest, grizzly bears tend to do their foraging in open meadows where their long claws, which are less curved than the black bear's, and larger shoulder muscles, allow it easily to dig for plants and rodents. Both bears' diets will vary widely depending on the time of year. For grizzly bears, however, army cutworm moths, whitebark pine nuts, elk, bison, deer, moose, and cut-throat trout are the highest-quality food items. Grizzly bears will also scavenge meat when necessary, eating winter-killed and road-killed wildlife, as well as animals killed by other predators, such as wolves.

Early on in Yellowstone history, park managers allowed visitors to feed black bears along park roads. It was a common site to see crowds of bears going right up to the window of visiting cars to get a snack. This caused big problems. There were an average of 48 injuries to humans caused by bears each year, and more than 100 cases of black bears damaging other human property in search of food. It wasn't until 1960, however, that the park implemented a bear management program with the goal of reducing the number of bear-caused injuries to humans and re-establishing bears in a natural state. The park gradually instated more rules and established "bear management areas" of the park from which park visitors are restricted, in order to minimize, or cut down, the number of bear-human interactions.

### **Grizzly bears, black bears, and wolves**

Many are surprised to find that bears and wolves can coexist in the same ecosystem. Grizzly bears, black bears, and gray wolves have historically lived together in much of the same range throughout a large portion of North America. In general, they prefer to avoid each other and most interactions between the species involve food. The behavior of bears and wolves during contact with each other is dependent upon many variables such as age, gender, reproductive status, prey availability, hunger, aggressiveness, number of animals, and previous experience in interacting with the other species. Few instances of bears and wolves killing each other have ever been documented. Wolves sometimes kill bears, but usually only cubs.

Wolves prey on hoofed grazers, such as elk, year-round. Bears usually feed on these same animals only as carcasses, or calves in spring. In fact, bears may *benefit* from the presence of wolves by taking carcasses that

wolves have killed. If a bear wants a wolf-killed animal, the wolves will try to defend it though the wolves usually fail to chase the bear away.

### **Your safety in bear country**

On average, bears injure one person each year within Yellowstone National Park. In 2011, in separate incidents, two visitors were killed by bears inside the park. Hiking in bear country takes appropriate preparation. Before you set out, ask about area closures, advisories, and seasonal food habits of local bears. Know what to do if you encounter a bear unexpectedly.

**Statistically, you're most likely to have an encounter with bears at park roadsides.** If you see a bear while driving, do not stop. Regardless of what other people may do, keep moving until you can safely park. If the bear is within 100 yards, watch and take pictures from inside your car. Always follow the directions of park staff on scene.

**As you venture beyond developed areas, stay clear of animal carcasses.** Bears are very protective of carcasses as a food source. A single dead animal can attract and hold more than a dozen bears. Many may be bedded down nearby. Watch for gatherings of birds such as ravens, magpies. They can be good first indicators that a carcass is nearby. Leave the area immediately by the same route you used to get there.

**Bears don't like surprises.** Be vigilant about alerting unseen bears to your presence. Some trail conditions make it hard for bears to see, hear, or smell approaching hikers. Make noise by calling out and clapping your hands loudly at regular intervals.

**Know how to react.** If you have a surprise encounter with a bear, do not run. Face the bear and slowly back away. If a bear charges you, stand your ground and use your bear spray. Do not drop your pack. It can help to protect your back from injury. If a bear makes contact with you, fall to the ground onto your stomach and play dead.

**A mother bear (a sow) protecting her cubs is one of the most dangerous situations you can face in nature.** As cute as cubs can be, no photograph of them is ever worth risking personal injury. Always assume mother is nearby and ready to protect her young.

As you enjoy park trails:

- Be alert for bears and watch for fresh tracks or scat.
- Make noise in areas where you can't see far around you.
- Carry bear spray and know how to use it.
- Avoid hiking alone. Hike with three or more people.
- Do not run.