

Montgomery Parks Living with Wildlife

Living with Black Bears



*Black Bear standing at a bird feeder.
Photo credit: Rich Cooley/Northern Virginia Daily*

Currently in Montgomery County, black bear sightings are a rare occurrence and most occur during the months of June and July when young, solitary bears (most often young males) are striking out on their own and travelling considerable distances in search of a suitable home range to call their own. The vast majority of these young bears are transient, and they find their way to more desirable, bear habitats in western Maryland, Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Virginia.

These sightings are exciting to most people but can be alarming to many citizens who are not expecting to see bears travelling through!

The future of black bears in Montgomery County is a debatable topic. It is the opinion of some Maryland wildlife professionals that Montgomery County will be the next county to be home to a permanent, breeding population of black bears. As more, young, solitary bears visit Montgomery County in search of suitable habitat; it is likely that some will begin to find select areas favorable, resulting in the animals staying in the county indefinitely. As more females find the county suitable and remain here, a breeding population will likely be established.



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Facts

Description

The American Black Bear (*Ursus americanus*) is the largest land mammal native to the State of Maryland. Once nearly extirpated from the State, due to forest habitat degradation and indiscriminate killing, black bears have made a strong comeback largely due to conservation efforts and forested habitat improvements. Today, breeding populations of black bears in Maryland reside in the four western counties: Garrett, Allegany, Washington, and Frederick). However, as black bear populations thrive and expand sightings of these beautiful animals are becoming more and more widespread throughout central and southern Maryland, including Montgomery County.

Black bears are usually black in color but can be found in a variety of color phases including brown, cinnamon and even blonde. Adult bears typically weigh between 125 and 400 pounds but can weigh in at over 600 pounds! They stand at about 3 ft. high to the shoulder and are approximately 75 inches long from nose to tail while standing on all fours. They have relatively long, rounded ears and small, dark eyes, and are able to climb trees proficiently with the use of their claws. Black bears have a keen sense of smell, but their eyesight is somewhat average (about the same as humans). As a result, bears are sometimes observed standing upright on their hind feet to gain a further olfactory advantage and to improve their eyesight capability.

Diet

Black bears are omnivores which means they eat a wide variety of foods including plants, roots, nuts, berries, other fruits, insects, reptiles, amphibians, mammals, fish, trash, birdseed and carrion. Bears tend to be opportunistic feeders and will follow their nose to any easily accessible food source. This tendency, combined with proximity to agricultural or suburban areas and humans, can lead to nuisance behavior as bears rummage through trash cans and compost piles, knock over bird feeders, destroy bee hives and pillage crops.

Breeding

Black bears typically breed beginning in late May through June and into July. One female (sow) will give birth to a litter of 1 – 5 cubs (most commonly, 2) during the winter months while most her time is spent in a winter den. Sows will typically produce one litter every other year.

Family Life

Black bears, especially males (boars) are largely solitary animals. However, bear cubs will stay in a family group with their mother for approximately 18 months, after which, they will strike out on their own to find their own territory.

Tracks

Black bear tracks show 5 toes in both front and rear tracks, and often show claw marks. Front tracks are most commonly 3.5 – 6 inches in length and 3.5 – 5 inches in width, and rear tracks 5.5 – 8 inches in length and 3.5 – 5 inches in width. Walking stride is approximately 12 – 20 inches from rear track to rear track.

Scat

Black bear scat is varied in appearance due to their omnivorous feeding behavior. In general, scat is tubular in shape and found in piles. Since bears eat a variety of plant materials, often their scat will contain seeds, fragments of nuts and small chunks of fruit, etc.



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Keep Black Bears Wild and Fearful of Humans

As black bear sightings become more common, bear interactions with humans and conflicts with human interests will likely result. Education about bears and knowledge of ways that citizens can avoid conflicts are essential to minimizing negative impacts. Above all, we must do our part to keep black bears wild and fearful of humans. The best approach to avoiding negative interactions with black bears is to do your part to not attract bears in the first place!

Issues and Solutions

Preparing for and Avoiding Negative Interactions with Black Bears

Black bears that become too comfortable around humans can quickly become pests as they exploit potential food sources like pet food bowls left outside, bird feeders, compost piles, trash cans, beehives, vegetable gardens, fruit trees and agricultural crops. If bears become comfortable around humans and habituated to easily accessible, desirable food sources, they can become a very real threat to public safety. To safely and responsibly live with our new neighbors we are going to have to adapt to their presence and adjust our habits accordingly.

Black bears are curious animals and will sometimes follow their noses into trouble. Here are some tips to prepare for and/or avoid negative interactions with black bears:

- NEVER FEED BEARS OR OTHER WILDLIFE (intentionally or unintentionally). Feeding black bears can seem fascinating and fun, but it is a recipe for disaster. Feeding bears is illegal in the State of Maryland.
- Don't leave bowls of pet food or water outside. If possible, keep all pet food indoors at all times.
- Keep garbage in sturdy, clean containers with tight fitting lids. (Bear proof cans are recommended in areas where bear interactions become common.) Secure all trash cans and clean them regularly to minimize strong food odors as much as possible.
- Keep compost that contains food materials in enclosed bins away from your residence
- Keep bird feeders out of reach. Do not over fill bird feeders, and stop filling them prior to the month of April (It has been said that "In April, a bird feeder becomes a bear feeder")
- Keep barbeque grills clean and secure
- Always walk your dogs on a leash
- Do not tolerate bears becoming comfortable around your yard – encourage them to leave by making loud noises, etc.

What should I do if I see a black bear on my property or elsewhere?

First, REMAIN CALM. If you are in a safe location, take a moment and watch them, but be sure to back away slowly and leave the area while remaining unnoticed, if possible. Generally, black bears are fearful of humans and will run as soon as they see or smell them. Consider yourself lucky to have the opportunity to observe such a beautiful wild animal first-hand.

If you are outdoors when you see a bear on your property, back away slowly and go inside, making sure that there is an escape route for the bear. If the bear refuses to leave and/or becomes a nuisance, speak to it calmly,

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yet boldly, and back away while not making direct eye contact. If a bear climbs a tree, leave the area and be sure no people or pets are nearby. Once a bear feels safe, it will usually climb down and leave the area. In the unusual event that you encounter a bear that seems unafraid, bold, or woofs and snaps its jaws or slaps the ground, remain upright and back away slowly while not making direct eye contact. Do not run! If you have food, do not throw it to the bear or leave it for the bear in the hope that it will then leave you alone, that will just teach it to associate people with food and that is not desirable. If the bear follows, make lots of noise while making yourself appear as large as possible.

Do not lie down. Always remember to remain calm. Be sure to give the bear plenty of space for escape. Back away slowly and leave the area.



Black Bear running through recreational field.



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More Information

Report Black Bear Sightings in or Near Parks

Please report any Black Bear sighting (and any bold or aggressive bear behavior) to wildlife authorities

- Maryland Department of Natural Resources
- For emergencies involving bears or other wildlife around your home or elsewhere in the county, contact the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Emergency Number 410-260-8888.
- Maryland Wildlife Information Line
- If you experience problems with bears or other wildlife around your home contact the Maryland Wildlife Information Line, toll free, at 877-463-6497
- M-NCPPC Montgomery Parks
- Wildlife Ecology Unit – 301-962-1344

Learn More

- Maryland [Department of Natural Resources](#) (DNR) Wildlife and Heritage Service
 - Living with Black Bears: http://dnr.maryland.gov/wildlife/pages/hunt_trap/bblivingwith.aspx