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Natural History Notes



MIKE DOMBECK grew up in the Moose Lake area and graduated from Hayward High School and the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. He has a B.S. degree in Biology and an M.S. degree in Aquatic Biology. He has taught Zoology at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point and is presently a staff member of the University of Minnesota's Bell Museum of Natural History. Mike has also been an area fishing guide since his high school days.

THE BLACK BEAR



Wisconsin's black bear is a valuable wildlife resource. In pioneer days the black bear inhabited almost all of Wisconsin but now is generally limited to the northern third of the state. The black bear prefers a habitat of intermixed forest, marshes, and large swamps, making Sawyer County an ideal home.

The home range of the black bear covers a radius of five to ten miles and the ranges of several bears may overlap. They are generally solitary except at breeding season. Bears may congregate where food is abundant, such as garbage dumps and berry patches. They are omnivorous but primarily eat vegetable material such as berries, nuts, grasses, and leaves. Smaller amounts of insects, small animals and carrion are also in their diet.

The average adult weighs 250 to 350 pounds; however, several bears over 600 pounds have been recorded. The record is about a 650-pounder shot near Glidden, Wisconsin. The color may vary from black, which is most common, to light brown. The bear is not a true hibernator but goes into a state of dormancy from the first snowfall of the winter until late April. Its den is usually a natural cavity under a

log, stump, or brush pile. During winter dormancy its body temperature is lowered and eating and excretion are stopped.

The black bear breeds every other year usually after it reaches 3-1/2 years of age. One to four cubs are born in the den during January or February after a gestation period of about 7-1/2 months. At birth the cubs are hairless and weigh about 12 ounces. The cubs stay with their mother until their second summer.

Bears are easily alarmed in the wild and difficult to see except they are a common sight at garbage dumps, especially at night, foraging for food. Damage to camps can be easily avoided by proper garbage disposal and storing food in odor-proof containers. They can usually be scared away by a loud noise.

Bear grease has long been prized by bakers for making pastries. The meat is excellent but must be cooked thoroughly since the possibility of getting trichinosis exists, just as in pork. When you see a bear, admire him at a distance and treat him with respect. And remember: bears are not pets.



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