

BLACK BEARS AT WEST POINT

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Every year, especially in the spring, West Point residents may get an unexpected opportunity to see the largest animal species found at West Point - the black bear. Black bears are the only bear species found in the United States east of the Mississippi River.

Now wait - aren't bears creatures of the wilderness that would rather be as far away from people as they can possibly go?

Well in New York, as recently as the 1970's, that just might have been the case. Black bears were primarily found in the Adirondacks, in the Central Catskills, and in the Allegheny National Forest in western New York. Since the late 1970's though, a burgeoning bear population in northern New Jersey has led to a large immigration of bears into the more densely populated areas of southeastern New York, including West Point.

Why is this happening? There are two reasons. First, bear hunting was not allowed in New Jersey until 2003, so, the bruins there reproduced unchecked and do not develop any fear or respect for human beings (in a wrestling match with a black bear, a human would lose). Second, people have made it easy for bears to survive by taking advantage of humans. Our garbage cans provide convenient and tasty sources of food as do the meals we feed our pets outside, our vegetable gardens, beehives, fields of sweet corn, bird feeders, and, rarely, livestock. Greasy barbecues are also a strong bear attractant.

The black bears that are seen during the spring and summer at West Point are mostly two-year-old males that have been run off by their mothers and are out on their own for the first time. When the young bears venture into urban areas, they get confused and just try to avoid humans. However, if a food source is present, a young bear will stay around until the food is gone. To avoid problems with bears, West Point residents can take several simple steps. First, keep the lids on all garbage cans and bins closed. Keep garbage cans locked in the garage until trash pick-up day. Spray trash bins and garbage cans with ammonia (bears and other wild mammals do not like the smell at all). If you have used your barbecue, do not leave the greasy grill out (bears love the aroma of grease). Do not leave pet food outside unless your pet is eating it. Do not put out bird feeders from April through July (bears love birdseed and birds really don't need any help finding food at this time of year). And, when out in the woods, be sure to make noises as you move about. This will alert a bear, which will then vacate the area, often without a person knowing that the bear was even in the vicinity.

Black bears will never become as numerous as deer. Why is that so? It is simply because black bears need up to 60 square miles of habitat for food. Not every kind of bear food is available throughout the year. When one food source has been eaten up, the bear must move along or starve. What do black bears eat in the wild? Wild berries are consumed with gusto. Beechnuts and acorns help a bruin fatten up for the winter. Wild

mushrooms, green plants, fish, insects, grubs, small animals, carrion (dead animals), and, of course, wild honey help round out a bear's diet.

During the winter months when food is scarce, black bears generally go into a den and sleep there until springtime. They are not true hibernators like woodchucks or bats. A bear's body temperature only falls a few degrees during its winter sleep, while a woodchuck's body temperature will drop almost to the freezing point of water. A bear can also quickly awaken from its winter sleep while a true hibernator needs several hours to awaken. A bear's winter den can be a cave, but more likely it is a hollow log, a brush pile, or a hollow tree 20 feet up from the ground. Whatever shelter is dry and protected from the elements will do.

West Point personnel do not need to be afraid of the bears. Just treat the animals with respect and do not treat them like domestic animals. Do not try to approach bears or feed them. It is against the law for people to deliberately feed wild bears.

Black bears are usually not seen by anyone just tramping through the woods. The bruins typically frequent thick swamps or cruise the ridge tops and usually move off whenever they hear people coming. If you should see a bruin at West Point, consider yourself lucky and enjoy the spectacle. Then, be sure to report the sighting to the Natural Resources Branch office, DHPW at 938-3857 or by e-mail to yj6936@usma.edu.

If you have any questions about black bears or other West Point wildlife, contact the USMA Wildlife Biologist at 938-3857 or by e-mail (yj6936@usma.edu).