

# LAKE COUNTY'S OCCASIONAL INHABITANTS

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Hal Korber/PGC Photo

**M**uch attention has been given over the past few years to the presence of black bears sighted in and around Lake County. Although cause for concern to some, these sightings represent a successful effort on the part of this interesting species to negotiate modern day landscape and habitat changes as well as public sentiment towards such a large animal sharing our space with us.

Prior to European settlement black bears were common inhabitants of Ohio. Once settlement began to spread across the state, unregulated hunting and massive deforestation that occurred as towns, farms and industry were established resulted in a significant reduction in the abundance of bears inhabiting the state. By the 1850s black bears were considered extirpated from Ohio. The black bear would be largely unseen again in Ohio, although infrequent sightings were recorded, for the next 130 years. By the mid-1980s, reports of black bear sightings began to occur annually. By 1993, the Ohio Division of Wildlife (ODOW) established a reporting and verification process. Most of the bear reports that have been received are believed to be young males, from 1.5 to 3 years old, typically having ventured into Ohio from Pennsylvania or West Virginia. Current estimates by the ODOW put bear numbers in Ohio somewhere between 50 and 60. The number of sightings can be double that in a given year.

The black bear's home range appears to be influenced mostly by habitat quality, the age of the bear, whether it is male or female and the number of other bears in the area. In the woodlands of New York and Pennsylvania, for instance, home range size varies from 24 to 50 square miles for females and 100 to 120 square miles for males. Ohio's bears would likely have home ranges similar to these. Movement of 100 miles or more from their cub range has been recorded for some first year males as they attempt to establish their own territories. This behavior has probably resulted in an increase in bear sightings in recent years, although it is also likely that it has contributed to the slow population growth of black bears in Ohio because they rarely remain in one area long enough to become established.

Bears are usually active early in the morning and late in the evening. They will normally bed down most of the mid-day and throughout the night. In areas of high human population bears will often adjust this schedule and become active at night when few people are about. Seeing bears travel during daylight hours is uncommon, but does occur in the fall as they prepare to den, when young bears strike out in search of new territory and during breeding season. At latitudes similar to Ohio, bears locate their dens between early November and mid-December. They will emerge from the den between mid-March through mid-April.

Bears, especially males, are best described as promiscuous breeders. Females may mate with more than one male, however staying with a single male is most common. Breeding usually occurs from mid-June through mid-July. Females are induced ovulators, meaning that the eggs are not released from the ovaries until mating has occurred. It is believed that this strategy enables bears to prepare for winter denning and gestation without the usual distractions associated with the breeding season. The young are born from mid-January through early February while the sows are in their over winter dens. Sows and their cubs leave the dens when the cubs are approximately three months old. The young remain with the mother for the first year and a half of their lives.

Growth during a cub's first year is rapid. At birth, the sightless cubs weigh about eight ounces. By the time that the cubs open their eyes at about six weeks of age, they weigh between three and four pounds. Typically, cubs weigh between 25 and 65 pounds by September and may weigh nearly 70 to 80 pounds by the time they enter the winter den for the first time with the sow in early November. Most females are 3.5 years old before they first breed. In the initial litter, a sow usually produces a single cub. Two or three young are normal for subsequent litters, and as many as five offspring have been recorded in one litter. Sows generally breed every other year unless the litter is lost or the quality of the habitat is especially good. Healthy bears in quality habitats can live to 20 years old.

Bears are omnivorous and highly opportunistic, feeding on a variety of foodstuffs including fruits, nuts, insects, grasses and leaves, flowers, fish, carrion, and occasionally newborn mammals and birds. In fact, many of the northeast Ohio sightings result from residents seeing bears entering and foraging in yards with birdfeeders, beehives, pet food dishes and even trashcans. Their diet will change with the seasons based on the availability of certain foods.

Black bears are amazingly adaptable creatures that have shown a remarkable ability to adjust their biology to human impacts in their habitats. Occasionally, one of these young bears comes into close contact with humans. Often the ODOW can respond quickly, relocating the bear to a more appropriate place. Bear sightings should be reported to your local wildlife officer or the District 3 ODOW headquarters in Akron. In the very unlikely event that you encounter a bear, the best course of action is to leave it alone and allow it to go its own way. Bears are generally shy and try to avoid interaction with people. Black bears are an endangered species in Ohio and injuring or killing one is a violation of Ohio wildlife laws. Black bears will likely continue to venture through Lake County and throughout much of eastern Ohio in increasing numbers. Our cautious and patient observations of these creatures can be exciting opportunities in wildlife watching.



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