

Black Bears

RESOURCE BRIEF

Importance

The black bear (*Ursus americanus*) is the most common and widely distributed bear species in North America. However, the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE) is one of the few areas south of Canada where black bears coexist with the grizzly bear (*Ursus arctos*). From 1910 to the 1960s, park managers allowed visitors to feed black bears along park roads, although the National Park Service officially frowned on this activity. During this time, along with Old Faithful, black bears became the symbol of Yellowstone for many people, and are still what some people think of when Yellowstone bears are mentioned. Since 1960, park staff have sought to deter bears from becoming conditioned to human foods.

Status

Little is known about the black bear population in Yellowstone or whether it has been affected by the increase in grizzly bear numbers and distribution since the 1970s. Black bears are commonly observed in the park, especially on the northern range and in the Bechler area of the park. Black bears have few natural predators, although both cubs and adults are occasionally killed by their own kind or by the other large carnivores with which they compete for food—wolves, cougars, and grizzlies. Vehicle collisions (average = 1/year) and removals of nuisance bears (average = 1 every 5 years) are not common either. Most black bear mortality in the park is likely attributed to old age or other natural causes. Outside the park, some black bears are killed during state regulated hunting seasons. As their



access to human foods has been reduced, human injuries from black bears in the park have decreased from an average of 45 per year during the 1930s–1960s to approximately one injury every five years since 1980.

Discussion

Although black bears, grizzly bears, wolves, and cougars have different foraging techniques, activity patterns (Fig. 1), and habitat requirements, they compete for many of the same food sources. Ungulate carcasses, for example, are an important food that black bears obtain by either killing newborn elk and deer or scavenging other predator-killed or winter-killed ungulates. Therefore, the current abundance of other carnivores has not only altered the abundance and distribution of carcasses on the landscape, it has increased conflicts between species at these food sources. Black bears are occasionally radio-collared for management and scientific reasons, with the latter focusing on research on habitat selection and multi-carnivore interactions.



In the early days of National Park Service management in Yellowstone, black bears could be fed along roadsides and at garbage dumps. Today, black bears in the park are wild.

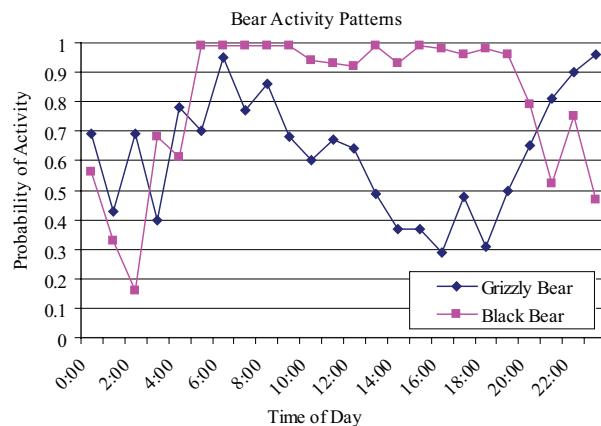


Figure 1. Comparison between black bear and grizzly bear activity patterns.