

Outdoor Insights

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JEFFERSON COUNTY OPEN SPACE

Be Bear Aware!

*a conversation with Mary Ann Bonnell
Visitor Services Supervisor
Jeffco Open Space*

What kind of bear might I encounter in this area? Although they can be of any color and usually a shade of brown, only the black bear, *Ursus americanus*, is known to exist in Colorado. Colorado Parks and Wildlife estimates the black bear population in Colorado to range from 10,000 to 12,000 with the average bear living 15-20 years in the wild.

Is it unusual to see more black bears in the late summer and early fall? In the fall, berries such as chokecherry, wild plum, grape-holly and hawthorn will ripen to their sweetest and most calorie rich state from early August to the end of the season. Black bears need as many calories as they can consume to bulk up for winter hibernation. They will spend up to 20 hours a day foraging, consuming nearly 20,000 calories. The berries at lower elevations ripen first, increasing the chance that hikers, mountain bikers and picnickers on our lower foothills trails, particularly those near drainages and streams, might encounter a bear.

How would I know if black bears have been in the area? As you walk along a muddy trail, you may note bear tracks along the way. Bear tracks have



five toes, long claws and because bears plant their heel and roll onto their toes on the rear foot, their rear track looks almost like a stout human track. You might also note bear scat or feces along the trail. Because they are eating so much fruit in the fall of the year, their scat tends to be purple, full of pits and loose.

What should I do if I see a black bear?

If you see a black bear at a distance, do not attempt to approach it. Monitor its behavior for stress or concern related to your presence. Seeing a black bear at a distance is a terrific wildlife watching opportunity. If you happen across a bear at close distance, do not turn your back or attempt to run away. Black bears are agile, can sprint up to 35 miles per hour and run up or down hills quickly and easily. They are strong swimmers and their short, curved claws help them to climb trees. If a bear stands upright or moves closer, it may be trying to detect smells in the air. This is not a sign of aggression. Once it identifies you, it may leave the area. If the bear approaches, blow a whistle,

clap your hands or yell. If cubs are present, do not approach the cubs or get between the mother bear and her cubs.

How do I avoid close encounters with bears? On the trail, making noise, chatting or wearing bear bells will likely make your presence known to the bear long before you see it. Bears use trails just as people do since it's easier to travel on a trail than through underbrush. Be aware of tracks, droppings and other bear signs such as claw marks on trees and hair on bark from rubbing. At the campsite, always store food, rubbish and any clothing items soiled with food or food smells well away from you, your tent and vehicle. At home, secure all trash and food items in bear resistant containers. Consider removing bird feeders, particularly at night and during the bear's fall feeding frenzy.

Are all black bears black? No. Black bears can be black, brown or blonde. Fur color does not define the species.

How big is a black bear? Depending on age, sex and health, they can be 4-6 feet long, and weigh between 200 and 450 pounds! Although black bears are Colorado's largest carnivore, 90 percent of their diet is made up of nutritious plants with the remainder likely a variety of insects, birds, eggs, carrion and young elk or deer.



Report sightings and encounters to Jeffco Open Space Natural Resources at 303-271-5927. When leaving a message, include your phone number for staff to follow up if additional information is needed.



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