

# NATURE DETECTIVES

Spring 2022



## Black Bear Cubs' First Year Cocoa and Ted Are Born in the Den

The two black bear cubs were born at the end of January during hibernation. Bear cubs are born amazingly small compared to the adult female bears they snuggle against. Ted and Cocoa each weighed about as much as an orange while their mom was close to 150 pounds. Like all newborn cubs, they had unopened eyes and no fur on their little bodies. Their first sensations were their mom's soft fur, and the taste of her thick, warm milk as they nursed. Cocoa, Ted, and mama bear learned each other's voice as they communicated in the darkness of the den in bear talk--grunts, whines, snorts, and rumbling hums. They also memorized each other's individual smell.

The den was at a spot where an old aspen tree uprooted in a gusty wind years earlier. Mama bear had dug down to enlarge the hole where the roots pulled out of the ground as the tree toppled. The space inside was just big enough for mama bear to turn around. The bears' body heat kept the cubs snug despite the winter weather outside.

### Ted and Cocoa Play and Nap While Mama Bear Sleeps

Although mama bear was often deep asleep to save energy, she would rouse to take care of her cubs' needs. Hibernating adult bears don't eat, drink, urinate or defecate. Bear moms must lick their cubs to groom them and keep the den clean.

Ted and Cocoa soon grew furry and their eyes opened. After five weeks, they could walk. As they gained strength, they started to move around more and tussle with each other.

One early spring day, mama bear left her cubs alone to check out the area outside. Curious, the cubs ventured just beyond the entry, but their outing was brief as mama bear returned and shoed them back to safety.

A few days later, mama bear led her cubs from the winter den to begin learning all the things a black bear needs to know.

By then the cubs weighed almost eight pounds.



## **A Bear's Life Isn't Easy in the Spring**

During winter denning, adult bears sleep soundly. Their breathing and heart rate slow down, but their body temperature drops only a little. They might wake and even walk around on warm days. By spring they are hungry but not yet ready to gorge on food. Their digestion needs to slowly ramp up after not eating all winter. They nibble tender green shoots and buds on trees and shrubs to rebuild their strength after a winter of inactivity.

Mama bear emerged from hibernation into a habitat where food was almost as scarce as in winter. She was still mostly dependent on body fat she accumulated the previous fall. With the cubs trailing along, mama bear sampled a few sprouts of green grass, and Ted and Cocoa continued to nurse. The trio napped when they were tired wherever they were.

### **Cubs Climb to Safety**

Female bears urge their cubs to climb up a tree when threats such as a mountain lion or humans are nearby. The mother bear may flee alone and return later to call her cubs down from the tree when it is safe. In other cases, the female may stay to fiercely defend her cubs.

Sometimes danger is a male black bear, new to the area. Some male bears will kill cubs, especially cubs they didn't father. A father bear's large home range overlaps several female ranges, and he usually is able to chase off any newcomer males. Keeping dangerous male bears away is the only thing father bears do for their cubs.

Bears identify the presence of other bears by smelling their scent in urine sprayed on plants and in the scent left on tree trunks used as scratching posts. Claw slashes on tree trunks made by a bear on its hind legs show the size of the bear that marked the tree.

### **Summer Brings an Abundance of Food**

A bear's dinner menu is mostly plants. When plants are tender and growing, bears feast on plant leaves, flowers, stems, roots, berries, nuts and seeds.

Black bears are classified as carnivores (meat eaters) but bears are not active predators. They are really omnivores because they will eat almost anything they stumble upon. Sometimes they kill fawns and small mammals like mice and rabbits when they happen to find them. They feed on dead animals (carrion) and the kills of mountain lions. They raid nests for baby birds and eggs.



Their claws tear into logs and dirt to find beetles, ants, and ant eggs.

They eat wasps and wasp larvae. They raid bee hives for the honey and eat the bees too.

They seem unbothered by the insects' stinging defenses.

## Fall Is Time to Get Fat

Bear cubs are weaned and eating the same food as adults by eight months of age. During the long days of summer and into fall, adult bears and youngsters eat and eat. One bear might eat 2,500 cups of berries a day, if they could find them. They can spend as many as 23 hours a day eating! They must pack on enough fat to get them through the no-food days of winter and meager fare of early spring. When natural food is scarce, bears will seek any source of calories.



Unfortunately in a dire search for food, some bears become garbage bears. Like humans, bears crave sugar and fat, and human garbage reeks of both. Bears can smell it miles away. While eating garbage, bears may swallow rotten food and harmful, non-food items such as foil and plastic.

Bears are smart and have excellent memories plus a powerful sense of smell so once they find garbage, pet food, bird seed, or picnic supplies they will return to the source again. Repeat offenders lose their fear of people and can become dangerous problem bears.

## Den Up Now -- Winter's Cold and Food Is Scarce!

Part of mama bear's range included a forest of large trees, good for climbing to safety and also good for locating den sites. Cocoa and Ted were nearing their first birthday, and they spent their first hibernation in a new winter den with mama bear. Each bear curled in a ball, its head between its front paws.



Come spring the cubs were one and a half years old, and it was time to wander off to find their own home range. Cocoa could share part of her mom's range, but Ted had to find a home away from any mature male bears so he traveled much farther. Like all females with cubs, mama bear had stayed with her cubs until their second spring because it takes a whole year to learn black bear survival skills.

## Threats to Black Bears

Bears can run 20-30 mph for short distances, but they can't outrun dangers such as parasites, disease, and starvation. Habitat loss is a big concern as more people move into bear habitat.

Adult bears have little to fear from predators, but mountain lions and wolves may attack weak or sick bears. Other bears may likewise attack and kill another bear.

Black bears are not endangered in Colorado, and bear hunting is carefully regulated here. With luck, Ted and Cocoa could live almost 20 years.



## Amusing Things About Bears

Black bears in Boulder County are typically black, brown, or a cinnamon reddish-brown. Cocoa's fur was brown and Ted's fur was black. Mama bear was black too.

Their fur can bleach lighter if they spend a lot of time in the sun, just as human hair can lighten in the sun.

The tongue of black bears is long and their lips are very flexible for nibbling the smallest berries and insects.

The pads on their feet are sensitive, and they don't like walking on sharp stones. Hibernating bears grow new skin on the pads after the old skin peels off in winter.

Standing up on their flat back feet is easy. Upright, they get a better view of things, but to us they look huge and scary. Bears see details and colors about the same as humans.

Bears are very strong, and can push over rocks twice their weight. They search underneath rocks and logs for insects and grubs.



## Hunting for Bear Sign

Most black bears occupy a home range as far from humans as possible. A nearby creek or other water source is a necessity. Boulder County bears inhabit the foothills and mountains below tree line, in areas with a variety of vegetation.

Explore a place where bears might live, and look for these signs of bears.

(Remember to be safe—stay with an adult and don't run down the trail by yourself.)

- Claw scratches on tree trunks
- Long black or brown hair caught on the bark of trees
- Broken branches on fruit trees where a feeding bear might climb
- Turned over rocks or logs
- Scat in a big pile, dark colored, and often with fruit skin, seeds, or pits
- Tracks that look a little like short, wide human footprints with five fat toes

## Bears Are Unpredictable

If you see a bear, remember to stop and back away, a long way away. A surprised bear or mother bear or even a bear eating a snack could attack. Bears look like big, shaggy dogs, but they don't consider people their friends.