

More About Black Bears

DID YOU KNOW... *that the black bear (Ursus americanus) is the state animal of West Virginia?*

Black bears live in all 55 of WV's counties!



A black bear sow (female) and her two cubs crossing the road in Cranberry Glades.

Do black bears hibernate?

Black bears in West Virginia DO hibernate. **Hibernation** is the decreased metabolism and activity of an animal for months at a time. Hibernation black bear-style is not actually a form of sleeping, because they are still alert. The black bear's metabolism slows down, and they don't eat, drink, or use the bathroom for the entirety of the time they are hibernating.

In preparation for winter, black bears actually block their system on purpose by eating lots of twigs, grass, rocks and callus tissues from their feet to form a fecal plug. In the spring, they eat a plant call "bear corn" that acts as a laxative to start their metabolism and digestion again. You can learn more [here](#).

Black bears spend about four months in a shallow den they either make or find. They fill it with leaves and twigs for bedding, but mostly rely on their fat layer for warmth. Sometimes bears will wake up on a warm day and walk around, so it's not uncommon

to see bear prints in the snow in mid-January on a sunny day! Once March comes around it takes them a while to “wake up” and be able to use their muscles and limbs to their full potential. [This video](#) shows how slow a bear can be once it wakes up from its hibernation.



Here is a photo of a black bear footprint found in the Eastern Panhandle of West Virginia during January of 2021. Photo taken by Kristen Wickert.

What do I do if I see a black bear?

Seeing a black bear can either be really exciting or extremely terrifying, particularly if it's your first time! In any case, it's important to be mindful of your surroundings and your actions. If you have yet to be spotted by these gentle giants, then back away quietly without turning your back to the bear. If the bear has been alerted to your presence, your first tactic should be to make yourself seem as big as possible. Doing this while making loud noises should easily intimidate the bear enough to scurry away.

Generally, black bears tend to be rather skittish or shy around humans, so it shouldn't take much to shoo them away. Even so, black bears are very adaptable to human presence. Many bears have begun to lose their fear of humans, sometimes being categorized as “nuisance bears.” The main reason a bear loses its wariness of humans is by being attracted to human food and crops. For black bear and human safety, it's important we do the following:

- ◆ Make trash, food and food waste, and/or compost piles less accessible – in sealed bins, for example
- ◆ Clean up food around campsites, and clean outdoor grills of food waste
- ◆ Only put out bird feeders at the appropriate time of year (December – March)

Visit <https://bearwise.org/> to learn more about how to be safe around bears.

Here is an [educational game](#) about what animals must do when we alter and invade their habitat.

What do black bears eat?

When it comes to feasting, black bears don't discriminate! They eat a wide variety of things that include plants and animals, making them **omnivores**. A black bear's diverse diet can consist of wasps, berries, grass, fish, black walnuts and much more. However, [always be mindful of your trash](#) as black bears are infamous for their attraction to human garbage, pet food, and other human-associated foods.



Black bear diets change with the seasons. On the left: black bear scat with visible pits of the dogwood fruit in September. On the right: Taken in November, where the bear is eating grass and rose hips, likely to contribute to its fecal plug formation in preparation for winter.

Photos taken by Kristen Wickert in Greenbrier County 2021.

Bear hunting in WV

A bear hunting season was first established in 1935 to *preserve* black bear populations that were at risk from aggressive, unregulated hunting in those days, mostly because of their impact on farms. Education programs, permits and tag limits helped stop needless killing of bears in the Mountain State, and the black bear population rebounded strongly.

Learn more about bear hunting and regulations on the WV Department of Natural Resources's website: <https://wvdnr.gov/frequently-asked-questions/black-bear-seasons-regulations/>

Bear mythology

Have you ever seen the constellation **The Big Dipper**? This constellation is also known as Ursa Major, meaning the “greater she-bear.”

Learn more about this constellation and the lore behind it [here](#).

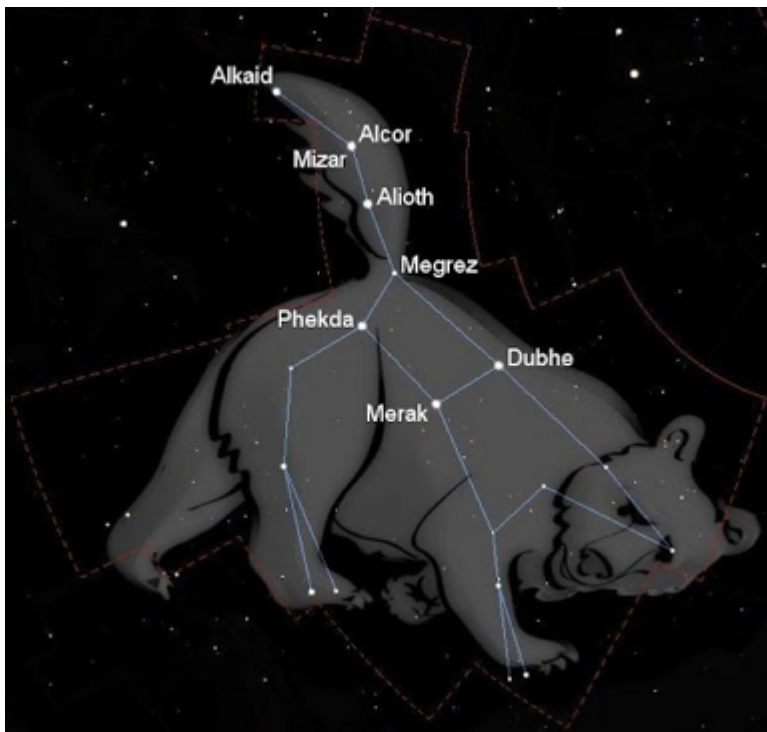
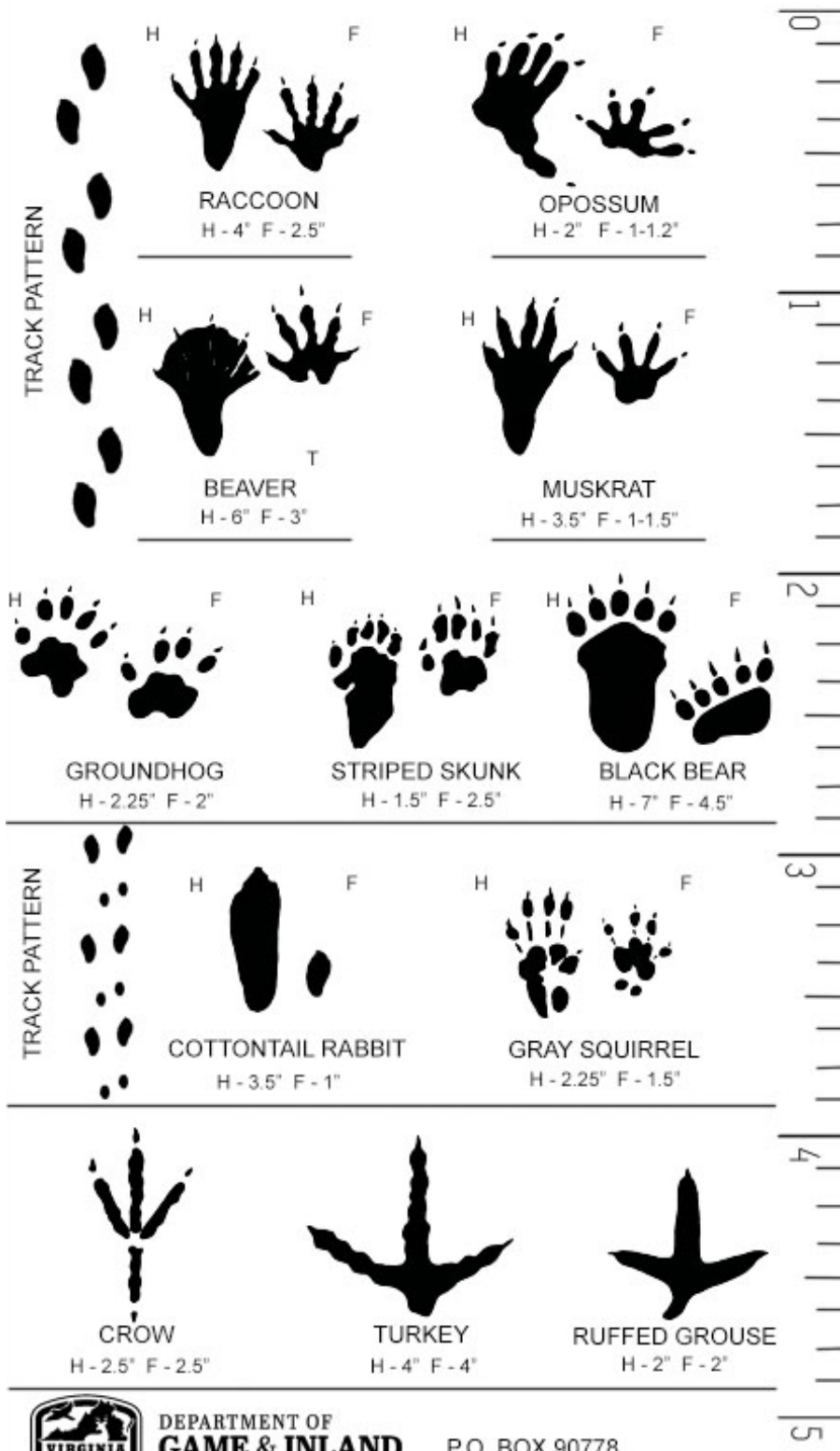


Photo by [Futra-Sciences](#)

The Art of Tracking

Have you ever wondered what animal created a footprint you discovered? There are experts, called **trackers**, who know how to identify all sorts of woodland creatures by their footprints! Trackers can even tell what gender and age an animal is by the shape and size of their prints, and the space between their prints (evidence of “gait,” the way that an animal walks). You’ll notice in the chart below that black bears have different-sized front and back paws.



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Unscramble these Bear Related Words!

RTACKS _____

LWSCA _____

END _____

BCU _____

SUSUR _____

VOOMIREN _____

RUF _____

GFMEAUNAN _____

TCAS _____

IRNAHBTEINO _____



Photo courtesy of Charlie Coch