



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

# Arctic

## *National Wildlife Refuge*

### Black Bears

Black bears are the most common species of bear in the United States. Smaller and more adaptable than either polar bears or brown bears, black bears live in forests on the south side of the Brooks Range mountains within the Arctic Refuge. Although they are called “black” bears, these animals may also be light or dark brown in color.

Black bears are very opportunistic while searching for food. They will eat almost anything edible. In the spring they feed on new grasses and bulbous roots, switching to ground squirrels, carrion or newborn moose or caribou calves when the opportunities arise. Later in the summer, black bears feast on many different kinds of berries and insects found throughout the boreal forest.

These animals face a cold, long winter, so they need to build up large fat reserves to sustain them until spring. Bears are not true hibernators, but their heart rate and respiration slow down during the winter denning period. Within the Refuge, black bears may den in a rock cavity or they may dig into a hillside. While in their dens, the bears will not eat or drink, nor will they urinate or defecate.

Females give birth to their cubs within their dens in late January or early February. The cubs are

hairless and helpless at birth, but quickly develop into moving balls of fur by springtime. Each litter usually has one to three cubs. To regain fat reserves for the upcoming winter, females may wean their cubs during the cubs’ first summer. Depending on the availability of food, the cubs will den with their mothers for one or perhaps two more winters, after which the cubs are independent enough to leave their mother’s side. Females will generally give birth to another litter the following winter.

Black bears tend to be solitary, secretive creatures, especially when trying to avoid brown bears, which may kill black bears found in their areas. In years when berries or other food is scarce, black bears increase their home ranges to be able to venture farther to find needed food items. When food resources are plentiful, they range over a smaller area and are more tolerant of other black bears.

