

## DISCOVERING NATURE COLUMN



© John A. DiGiorgio, Photographer

**TO VIEW 3:40 min DOCUMENTARY VIDEO:**  
<https://www.naturesartproductions.com/wildlife-projects.html>

### BLACK BEAR ENCOUNTERS

by Yoke Bauer DiGiorgio

*Director, Delaware Valley Eagle Alliance, Naturalist, Filmmaker, Author*

It was an early afternoon in late September several years ago. The air was crisp despite a bright sun, and the fall colors were just beginning to emerge. My husband, John and I were up in the Rockies photographing the elk in rut. Always exploring and searching out places where we might observe wildlife, we found ourselves hiking along a ridge overlooking a creek. Looking down, we could see a large black bear (a sow) stretched out over a rock basking in the sun asleep. We looked around at the nearby trees and spotted two cinnamon cubs curled up on a limb, also sleeping.

Despite their common name, black bears are not always black. Across Northern America, they may be black (most common in the east) or shades of brown, including cinnamon and blonde (more common in the west). In addition, black bears in the west are smaller their counterparts in the east. While Rocky Mountain males rarely exceed 400 pounds and females 230, males in the east average 600 pounds and females average 350.

The sow began to stir. We could hear her make a grunting sound and her two cubs came down from the tree. Together, they proceeded to walk along the creek feeding on the ripened berries along the way. We were amazed at how nimble their paws were, pulling down individual branches and delicately picked off the berries with their mouths. The cubs were playful, a pair of fat fur balls wrestling with each other. As first year cubs, they would have spent the past six months growing and developing rapidly,

watching their mother's every move and learning by imitating.

Cubs are born in den during January or February and are utterly helpless. By late March or early April when the family leaves the den, the cubs at three months old, weigh about 10 pounds. Now in the fall, weighing 60 – 70 pounds, enough to survive their first winter, they would be denning with their mother shortly, for the last time. In fact, the family would be disbanding the following summer, as their mother would again be ready to breed.

Black bears breed in June and July. It is not until the fall, however, that the fertilized eggs attach themselves to the female's uterine wall and begin to grow. Implantation takes place only if the female has gained enough weight to assure sufficient production of milk for the litter's survival. If not, the pregnancy will self-destruct.

Black bears are pretty tolerant of humans and "our" bear family spent a leisurely afternoon by the creek. Never showing any signs of being disturbed or threatened, they allowed us to observe them for over an hour before finally disappearing.

Black bears are shy, intelligent and exceptionally adaptable. Given a chance, they can live near us without much conflict. If we are tolerant and educate each other about the ways of black bears, the reality of the threat they pose is small. I feel fortunate for having encountered and been able to observe them as often as I have.

*Our forests would be empty without them!*

**DID YOU KNOW?** *The calluses (keratinized portion) on the pads of a black bear's feet are shed each year during it's late winter dormancy. The new pads are sensitive and may bleed when the emerging bear first walks on them.*

[http://bearstudy.org/website/images/stories/Publications/Shedding\\_of\\_Foot\\_Pads\\_by\\_Black\\_Bears\\_During\\_Denning.pdf](http://bearstudy.org/website/images/stories/Publications/Shedding_of_Foot_Pads_by_Black_Bears_During_Denning.pdf)



© John A. DiGiorgio, Photographer