

Basic facts about brown bears

How many are there? Large territories and a secretive life style make it hard to determine their exact number. Besides females with young, they lead a mostly solitary life. Sometimes they gather to feed at seasonally abundant food sources such as fruit trees or hunters' baits. Most experts agree that at present there are 600-800 bears in Slovakia.

Where do they live? There are bears in most mountains of central and north Slovakia.



What do they eat? The bear, although classified as a Carnivore, is not a good hunter. It has become an omnivore, getting over 90% of its food from plants. In spring it eats grass and herbage as well as carcasses of winter-killed animals. Its diet is more varied from summer to autumn, including bilberries, raspberries and other fruit, beech mast, acorns and ant and wasp larvae. Some individuals occasionally visit beehives, crops or rubbish bins or kill livestock.

Why do they hibernate? Sleeping during the winter saves energy when food is scarce. Most bears are inactive from December to Feb. or March, depending on food availability, weather, locality and individual. They need places free of disturbance for denning.

When are they born? Bears mate in May-July. The female gives birth in winter, in her den. At birth cubs weigh less than 0.5 kg. Young bears stay with their mother for up to 2.5 years, but some orphaned at less than 1 year old have survived in the wild. Adult females have 1-3 cubs (rarely 4) every 2 to 3 years. Due to this comparatively slow rate of reproduction, bears are vulnerable to over-hunting.

How big are they? Adult males weigh 140-350 kg, measure 170-220 cm from nose to tail and are 95-130 cm tall at the shoulder. Females are smaller, usually 100-200 kg, 160-200 cm and 90-110 cm respectively.

Bears in Slovakia

We can be proud that bears live in Slovakia, when they have disappeared from almost all of Europe. They are part of the country's natural and cultural heritage. Human activities are putting increasing pressure on bears' habitat. As the space left for them to live in diminishes, they compete with us for resources, leading to conflicts. If bears get food from refuse, hunters' bait sites or orchards and lose their wariness of humans they can become a nuisance. Let's keep bears in the wild.

Never approach or feed bears: people have been injured by individuals that had learnt to expect food from people and so lost their wariness. Such animals often have to be shot.

The BEARS Project

Bear Education, Awareness and Research in Slovakia is an initiative of non-governmental organisations designed to reduce bear-human conflicts. We aim to foster understanding and acceptance of bears by providing information on how to prevent problems.

For more information about The BEARS Project, or for extra copies of this leaflet, please contact:

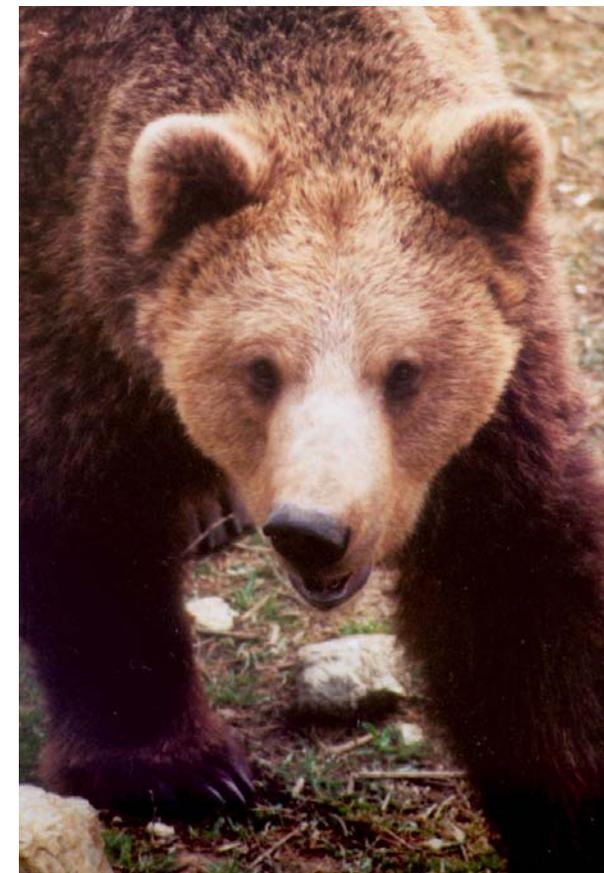


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If there are problems with bears in your area, please contact the nearest State Nature Conservancy office.

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Bears



Facts and tips on avoiding conflicts with the largest carnivore in Europe



Why do bears become a problem?

The majority of bear-human conflicts concern food. Bears are opportunistic feeders, quickly learning to utilise new food sources. A bear's nose is even better than a dog's and can lead it long distances to food or refuse. Once a bear obtains food from a hotel or cottage it may gradually learn to overcome its wariness of humans and return repeatedly.

Excessive forest fruit collection and some methods of commercial logging reduce bears' natural food supplies. Drive hunts and the intensive human use of mountain areas disturb bears, especially during their important pre-winter foraging season or while they are in their winter dens.

Avoid conflicts – responsible behaviour and preventive measures protect you and bears.

Preventive measures

Food and refuse: Secure all food and refuse so bears cannot get to them. Clean outdoor cooking areas. Odours from food (as well as perfumes and feminine hygiene products) are powerful bear attractants.

Camping: Use permitted sites, don't cook or store food in tents. Keep your campsite clean.

Hiking and berry/mushroom picking: Most bears avoid you if they know you are there, so keep in a group, make noise by talking and stay on trails. Dogs should be on a leash or left at home. Be cautious near dense vegetation, berry patches and carcasses, where you cannot see ahead or are walking into the wind.

Livestock, beehives, orchards and crops: Livestock cannot defend itself from bears. Well-raised, free-ranging livestock guarding dogs substantially reduce losses. Good quality electric fences exclude bears. Beehives can also be protected by putting them in metal cages or on raised platforms. Maize and other crops attractive to bears should be cultivated away from forest edges. The bear is protected by law – most damage it causes to agriculture is compensated. The best way to reduce conflicts is to prevent them.

Bears and humans

In the past, bears lived throughout the territory of Slovakia. Trophy hunting and persecution nearly eradicated them in the early 20th century. Legal protection has allowed bears to recover and re-settle part of their former range. In lowlands and river valleys their original forest home has been replaced by farmland, roads and settlements. The majority of bears now live in mountain regions that are also used by humans for forestry, hunting, agriculture, berry or mushroom picking and recreation.

To obtain their basic requirements of food, cover and den sites, bears need tens of km². They are threatened by the fragmentation of forests with roads and tourist infrastructure, habitat loss, poaching and disturbance by other human activities. If we know more about their needs, we can learn to live with bears and ensure their survival as integral parts of forests in the future.

Signs of bears

Being able to recognise the marks they leave behind and their most common foods can help you avoid encounters with bears. Their tracks have five toes and claws on each foot. The hind print is longer than the front one; an adult's is about the same size as a man's. (The tracks on this leaflet are those of a sub-adult.) We can recognise the faeces of bears by the remains of plant material, which they are not very efficient at digesting. Bears bite into or rip pieces of bark off trees, on which they rub themselves. This usually leaves a few hairs stuck in the resin, as well as a scent mark – a "message" for other bears. We can also find claw marks or broken branches on fruit trees, where they look for food. The presence of a bear can also be shown by excavated anthills or wasps' nests, broken open tree stumps and logs or overturned rocks, from which bears collect larvae and insects.



Are bears dangerous?

Many thousands of people live, work and recreate in mountain areas, yet nobody has been killed by a bear in Slovakia for at least 100 years. Generally bears are cautious and avoid humans, but conflicts occur. Bears injure up to 10 people each year, in many cases when acting in self-defence. Bears may attack if surprised by a sudden encounter or approached while hidden in dense vegetation or a den. Some will aggressively defend cubs or food. Dogs can provoke an attack. Injured animals are dangerous. Other problems occur with bears that are attracted to food and/or are used to the presence of people (i.e. are human habituated).

The best protection is to understand bear behaviour. Watch for signs of their presence.

What should I do if I see a bear?

Prepare for possible scenarios in advance. Every bear and every situation are different, so there are no fixed rules. Try to remain calm and assess the situation.

- If it has not seen you, return quietly by the way you came and make a wide detour. Leave bears plenty of room and an escape route – do not approach them.
- If it has noticed you, stop. Do not scream or run – you could trigger an attack. Bears can run as fast as horses, both up hill and down. If it stands on its hind legs, it is trying to identify you by sight or smell, not preparing to attack. Slowly raise your arms and talk in a low, firm voice. An unwary and persistent individual may be human habituated. Back away slowly and watch the bear's behaviour – if it moves towards you, stand your ground. If you climb a tree, you need to get at least 4 m off the ground.
- In a sudden close encounter, avoid eye contact (a sign of aggression). Even if a bear charges, it may be a bluff. Drop your pack only as a last resort – it can protect your body. If contact is made, play dead by lying still, face down on the ground. Protect the back of your neck and head with your hands. Once the bear senses you are not a danger, it will usually leave.