

# There's no such thing as a picky grizzly bear

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A new University of Alberta study, which tracked eating habits of grizzly bears living in the Alberta foothills, sheds some light on the animal's varied diet and their activity pattern.

"Alberta bears have remarkably diverse diets," said Dr. Mark Boyce, biological sciences professor at the U of A and co-author of the study, recently published in the *Journal of Mammalogy*. "They'll eat just about anything."

Little is known of the diets of grizzly bears living in boreal forests also used by humans. This new research study is the most comprehensive examination of grizzly bear diet ever conducted in Canada. Using global positioning system (GPS) radiotelemetry technology and analyzing 665 feces samples collected from 18 grizzly bears over a period of three years, the scientists also found that the bears packed a lot of activity into 24 hours.

The new research looked at five different activities the bears use to find food - whether it feeds on flowers, insects and plants or kills other animals - specifically ungulates.

The diverse diets help cushion the grizzlies against climate change and other vagaries of the environment, said Boyce. Specifically, the research team found that bears living in the foothills are effective predators of moose and deer. They are especially good at killing moose calves during the difficult spring, when other foods are not yet available, said Boyce. Mountain bears are largely vegetarian, by comparison.

The scientists identified 40 different food items, examining each for seasonal patterns of use and differences among mountain and foothills environments. The root of sweet vetch plants dominated early spring diets, while preying on ungulates, was greatest during late spring, although the timing varied between foothill and mountain bears. Moose are the most common ungulate eaten by the bear (83 per cent), especially newborns (54 per cent), with white-tailed and mule deer (16 per cent) and elk (one per cent), minor in comparison.

Rodents, insects and birds were also consumed. Green vegetation dominated early summer diets and as fruit ripened in early August, berries were added to the menu.

The scientists also learned that most of the activity of the east-slopes bears takes place in the daytime, especially morning and the evening. This is in contrast to bears living in spots where more frequent contact with humans take place, such as Banff National Park, where most bear activity has become nocturnal.

Boyce said food sources so near to highways and roads are dangerous for the animals.

"Bears are eating substantial amounts of clover and alfalfa, which are common roadside plantings," said Boyce. "Because these roadside plantings are attractive to bears, this can put the bears at risk of contact with humans. Nearly all new roads being constructed in the province are built by industry, either for timber harvest or oil and gas development."

"We should encourage industry to avoid using such attractive food items when planting in ditches and roadsides. It would be much better to use native grasses and other native plants to stabilize road banks and ditches. Most bear deaths occur near roads and we want to avoid attracting bears to areas near roads."

Source: University of Alberta

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