



# the BEAR is BACK

what to know about our  
official state mammal

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PHOTOS BY PAM McILHENNY

## After the Louisiana Purchase, natural resources

to support the expanding human population were exploited. The once-vast bottomland hardwoods fell to the saw, and adding to the habitat loss was hunting. Hunters shot game, and everyday people shot large carnivores, regarded as predators – and competitors – of livestock. With these adverse conditions, much of the wildlife associated with that bottomland forest suffered. The black bear population declined drastically during this time.

There are several species of bears worldwide, three of which inhabit North America. The polar bear lives in the ice and snow-covered far North and eats seals. The grizzly, or brown bear, dwells mostly in Alaska and western Canada. It ranges south into some of the northwestern United States.

The American black bear was originally found throughout most of North America. Taxonomically, they are carnivores, but more practically, they are omnivores – like a several-hundred pound raccoon. They consume a variety of food, including grass, insects and fruits during the summer; acorns and agricultural crops in the fall, and they will opportunistically take some animal matter.

The black bear was eliminated from much of its range by exploitation from early settlers. In the South, a remnant population – dubbed the Louisiana black bear – persisted in the swamps and bottomland hardwoods of Louisiana and some adjoining areas.

For the past several decades and continuing today there have been efforts to recover and research information about this population of bears. The earlier conservation and recovery efforts came from public and private agencies and private landowners, members of a group later named the Black Bear Conservation Coalition.

In 1992, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listed the black bear as an officially threatened species. Of the many subspecies in North America, the Louisiana black bear is the only one listed.

In Louisiana, hunting bears is outlawed. Don't mistake a cub for a wild hog; don't shoot a bear. You will suffer from ridicule from your friends and a federal judge, loss of the opportunity to hunt and a much-thinner wallet.

This low fecundity presents some special challenges and also opportunities for restoration and repatriation. Trapped and relocated individual bears often return to their home range from where they were captured.

Complementing this repatriation has been recent research to determine population status and viability. Information from this substantial research has recently been summarized in the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF), Louisiana Black Bear (LBB) Management Plan, February 2015, by Maria Davidson and others.

Black bears hibernate during winter in dens, and female bears birth their (very small) young during this time. Capturing a mother and her cubs and moving the whole family to a new area in an artificial den works. The dutiful mother will not abandon her cubs, and this technique is useful for establishing new populations in Louisiana.

According to Jared Laufenberg, research biologist from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, there are three criteria for recovery and ultimately delisting. The objectives are viable populations in core population area, a good chance of suitable habitat continuity, as well as habitat corridors and protection between the areas.

For researchers to learn more about this population, bears are captured and outfitted with radio transmitters to track their movements, assess dispersal and gather other pertinent data. Another research tactic is the use of bait stations with hair snares. Bears are attracted to these stations, which are surrounded by low barbed wire. Individual bears are identified by DNA analysis of hair follicles caught on the barbs. Data from bear sightings are also being collected and analyzed.

The ultimate goal of the research and repatriation efforts is the recovery and ultimately delisting of the population. According to Deborah Fuller, endangered species biologist with the USFWS and Maria Davidson (LDWF), recent data suggest bear populations are expanding. The LBB Management Plan



## DID YOU KNOW?

There have been very few serious human/black bear incidents. They are usually shy. But they are large, strong animals. I will always remember as a kid camping with my parents in the Smoky Mountains of Tennessee. We had a big metal cooler with burgers and a big block of ice inside sitting on the nearby picnic table which attracted a large bear. As the bear approached my dad got his German Luger out that he brought home from WW II – just in case. The bear stood up and swatted the cooler with his paw. It tumbled several times after hitting the ground. I was impressed.





DID YOU KNOW?

Black bears live up to 10 years, and they have characteristics that make them slow colonizers. Females provide longtime care for their cubs. Females are usually 3 or 4 years old when they birth their first litter, and typically only have a litter every other year. Litter size is small: Usually 1 to 3 cubs are born, depending on the age and physiological condition of the sow.

IN CASE OF AN ENCOUNTER

Bears can be very curious and will occasionally follow a person. Carry pepper spray if you are in bear country. If you encounter one yell, stand, raise your arms or back away slowly. Don't turn and run. A potential prey fleeing could trigger a predatory response from a bear. Don't approach a bear who's been hit by a vehicle or otherwise injured. An injured bear could be dangerous. Just call authorities.



details the population status of the four subpopulations. The Tensas River population, mostly in Tensas and Madison parishes, has the most bears and a positive growth rate. The Upper Atchafalaya population is also viable, and there is a newly established repatriated population in east-central Louisiana between these other two populations. Between 2001 and 2009, there were 48 female bears with 104 cubs moved into this area. There is gene flow between this population and the populations north and south. There is a fourth population, which is smaller and more isolated in the lower Atchafalaya, which, among other things, can suffer due to vehicle collisions.

An improved population is one important part of assessing this species' recovery. The other is whether the bear's habitat has improved from the historic loss and fragmentation that caused the Louisiana black bear to be listed.

Bear recovery also requires the cooperation of numerous agencies and individuals in support of this effort. We also need to restore the bears' prime habitat, bottomland hardwoods. There have been several programs administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service to reestablish bottomland forests on private land.



But there are also new challenges with more bears in new places: Bear-human interactions are increasing. Bears are attracted to food – and sometimes they can obtain human food a lot easier than their natural foods. Bears sometimes hone in on corn feeders, bee hives, pet food and camp food. In the South, we have dumpster-diving bears. And I hear stories from deer hunters that bears will show up after a rifle shot. Are bears learning that a rifle shot means a possible downed deer? A deer carcass or at least a gut pile may be their hot lunch program.

Bear diets are quite varied through the year. Bears do their carbo-loading and fat building in the fall before denning when they don't eat. And humans have a lot of things that bears like. Bears

show up looking for hand-outs, particularly when natural food, such as acorns in the fall, are in short supply, which is often. According to Myron Means, a bear biologist in Arkansas, where there are more bears, nuisance bear complaints are much more common in years of low acorn production.

Feeders with corn, mostly intended to feed white-tailed deer, are especially attractive to bears. But impatient bears don't wait for the feeder to sling the corn. They are strong enough to rip off the motor, too. The first smashed feeder I saw in Morehouse Parish: I immediately thought: This was either the work of a bear or some drunk teenagers.

However, you can get your feeder higher than a bear's reach. Suspend the feeder from a tall metal pole cemented into the ground with a

lateral yard arm. Run the cable through a pulley from the feeder along the yard arm down the pole to a boat winch on the pole at about shoulder height (yours, not the bears'). This has worked so far for me – unless a bear learns to operate the boat winch.

You can get help if you have a consistent problem bear. A regional office of the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries or the USDA APHIS Wildlife Services deal with problem bears. For consistent problem bears they have a program called adverse conditioning. The bear is harassed. It doesn't seem to be any fun for the bear. But it is usually effective in deterring problem bears.

The bear is here to stay. We need to learn how to live with them. 🐾



DID YOU KNOW?

Don't leave food attractants, such as fish frying grease, dog, cat, or livestock food, or bird feeders with seed if you have bears visiting these sites. And if you have honey bees you may need an electric fence.