



Florida Black Bear: A Threatened Species¹

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The black bear (*Ursus americanus*) has long been a species of special interest to people. Having grown up with bears such as "Smokey the Bear" or the world famous "Teddy Bear", most of us know what bears are but have very little knowledge of "real" bear ecology. In this publication, we provide some of the known facts about the Florida black bear.

DESCRIPTION

Black bears are not completely black. They have a brown muzzle and sometimes even a white "blaze" on the chest. Black bears are the smallest of North American bears. A big male can weigh over 600 pounds (270 kilograms), but most are closer to 270 pounds (121 kilograms). The average female is about 170 pounds (77 kilograms). The male is called a boar and the female, a sow. Young bears are known as cubs.

DISTRIBUTION

The black bear is one of the most widely distributed big game animals in North America. Its distribution extends from Mexico to Alaska, across to the Great Lakes, and Newfoundland, and down through the Appalachians into Florida. Although, the distribution in North America has remained the same,

the number of black bears has declined. They no longer are found in 19 of the interior states in which they formally occurred.

The Florida black bear also has experienced a significant population reduction. Once numerous throughout the state, black bears now are restricted to a few large areas of relatively undisturbed habitat (Figure 1).

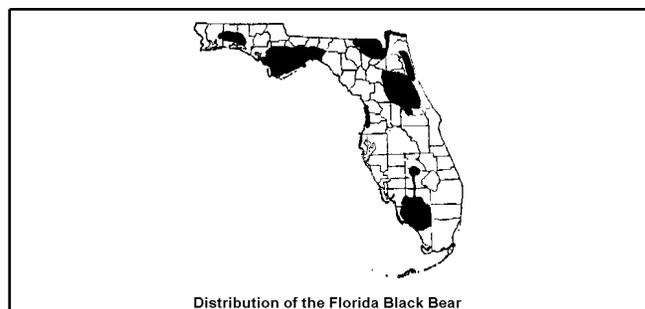


Figure 1.

HABITAT

Black bears prefer forested areas with dense understory vegetation. Thick, "impenetrable" swamps are ideal. Access to a variety of habitats that provides an assortment of foods during different seasons of the year also is important. Florida's subtropical climate, long growing season, numerous swamps, and

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diverse vegetation types provide excellent conditions for this species.

DIET

Black bears are omnivorous (eat meat and plants) and need an average of 11-18 pounds (5-8 kilograms) of food each day. They feed on almost any succulent, nutritious vegetation (tubers, bulbs, berries, nuts, and young shoots). The food items eaten most often and in the greatest volumes are seasonally available fruits and colonial insects.

The fruits of saw palmetto, cabbage palm, swamp tupelo, and oaks are preferred plant foods in fall. The honey bee is the most frequently eaten insect and armadillos are the most commonly eaten vertebrate.

BEHAVIOR AND HOME RANGE

Black bears usually are solitary except for the sow and her cubs. There also are brief periods such as breeding season encounters when bears may be found together.

The area regularly used by 1 adult male bear may be larger than 66 square miles (177 square kilometers). An adult female's home range is usually closer to 11 square miles (28 square kilometers).

Bears are most active at night (nocturnal). They also tend to reduce their movements during the coldest months of the year. This probably is due to a decrease in food availability. During this period, bears may "hole up" until more favorable conditions occur. They are true hibernators and individuals have been documented to sleep for more than two months at a time. One of the most common winter sleeping sites used by Florida bears is a bed of vegetation located in a thicket. Probably because of our relatively mild winters bears do not always hibernate in Florida.

REPRODUCTION

Black bears have been found to be more productive in Florida than in other states. Black bears breed in May-July. Gestation (pregnancy) lasts 210-215 days. One to 3 cubs are born in January or February, and stay with the mother for approximately 1 1/2 years. Males do not assist in raising the young nor is there a long-lasting pair bond for this species.

LEGAL STATUS

The Florida black bear was listed by the state as a threatened species, in 1974. This status applies to the entire state except for Baker and Columbia counties and the Apalachicola National Forest. Hunting the Florida black bear is prohibited throughout the entire state.

This subspecies of black bear is in danger of becoming extinct because of extensive habitat loss, not because of hunting. The original, heavily forested, prime bear habitats in Florida have and are being altered to accommodate the needs of hundreds of people moving into the state every day. Forests are being cleared and fragmented into areas too small to support healthy bear populations or in some cases even single animals.

Roadkills also are a major problem in areas where highways have cut through remaining bear habitat. Bears can run at a speed of about 30 mph for short distances; however, determining the best escape alternative while looking into the headlights of a high-speed vehicle is too great a challenge for the black bear and other species.

MANAGEMENT

The future of the Florida black bear is dependent on preservation of sufficient forest habitats through growth management and proper management of these forests. Because there are many unanswered questions concerning basic bear biology, scientific research also is necessary to help determine the most effective management practices.

Proper management of habitats is necessary to satisfy the black bear's varied diet. Management practices should strive to allow for a high diversity of plants. Converting naturally diverse flatwood and hardwood communities into slash pine plantations with very few other plants may reduce important foods for the black bear.

Management also is needed to reduce the number of road-killed bears. Some recommendations that may help to prevent bears from crossing highways include: fencing constructed parallel to the roadway, and underpasses (corridors) where bears regularly

cross roads. Signs also should be placed along highways to alert drivers of areas where the potential for animal-vehicle collisions is greatest. Construction of new highways and upgrading of existing highways for high speed, high volume traffic through important bear habitat should be avoided.

BEARS AND BEEKEEPING

Florida black bear habitat is also good habitat for honey bees. A management approach is necessary to address the problem that bears cause beekeepers. Florida is a large producer of honey and black bear raids on apiaries can result in serious economic damages. The best method to prevent bear damage to bee yards is to surround the yard with a well maintained electric fence. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission will provide technical guidance in the use of this alternative before other methods of control are considered. The electric fence design developed and proven effective by the Commission is in Figure 2 .

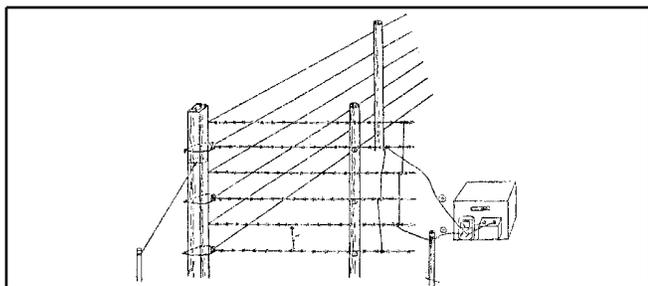


Figure 2.

Some construction tips are: 1) corner posts must be secured with guide wires; 2) wires must be stretched very tightly; 3) vegetation must be removed down to mineral soil beneath wires; and 4) on dry ridges, run additional ground wires to ground rods at all 4 corners. Materials for construction of a 75 x 30 foot (25 x 10 meter) rectangular fence cost about \$150.

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