LIVING WITH MISSISSIPPI BLACK BEARS

What do I do if I see a bear in the wild?
Enjoy from a distance; do not approach. If you are uncomfortable with your proximity to the bear, make noise (talk, whistle, clap, etc.) so the bear knows you are there and then slowly back away. Bears have relatively poor vision and will sometimes stand on their back legs to get a better view of what is around them. This is not a sign of aggression but merely their way of getting a better look at things.

Why would a bear enter a neighborhood?
Young male bears leave their mother's side when they are about 18 months old and go in search of their own territory. They can travel for hundreds of miles looking for unoccupied territory which can lead them into urban surroundings by mistake. Even older bears will sometimes expand their range in search of food resources during years of drought and can wander into areas of human settlement. As people continue to encroach into bear habitat, this can become more and more common.

AGFC

The other reason a bear might enter into an urban setting is the lure of unnatural foods. Things such as garbage, pet foods, barbecue grills, bird feeders, and beehives can be powerful enticements for a hungry bear. If bears are known to be in the area, items such as these should be kept in a secure place.

What do I do if I see a bear in my yard?
Stay inside your home or vehicle and leave the bear alone. It probably wandered in sometime during the night looking for food and will leave the same way once it realizes it took a wrong turn. Do not chase or scare the bear or allow your pets to do so. This will often cause the bear to take refuge in a tree and removes the chance of the bear leaving quietly. If left alone, the bear will likely climb down and leave the area on its own, usually after dark when it feels safe.

Washington County; USFWS

Why is feeding bears such a bad idea?
While many people enjoy seeing bears in the wild, the intentional feeding of bears is never a good idea. Intentional feeding of bears often brings them into areas they would normally not be found and often close to human activity. This can cause bears to lose their natural fear of humans as they learn to associate people with food. As they become less shy, they can cause property damage and become "a little too close for comfort".

What steps should I take to keep bears in their rightful place?
Prevention is the key to avoiding conflicts with bears. Keeping garbage indoors in a secure shed or garage until time for pick up and removing all trash from hunting camps at the end of the hunt will go a long way in preventing bears from coming around. Also, rinsing garbage cans with bleach will prevent any lingering odors. Pet foods should not be left out overnight and wildlife feeders should be hung out of a bear's reach. Electrical fencing around beehives, fruit trees, and livestock yards has also been shown to be almost 100% effective at deterring black bears. **The best way to avoid problems with black bears is to take precautions that will not attract them in the first place.**

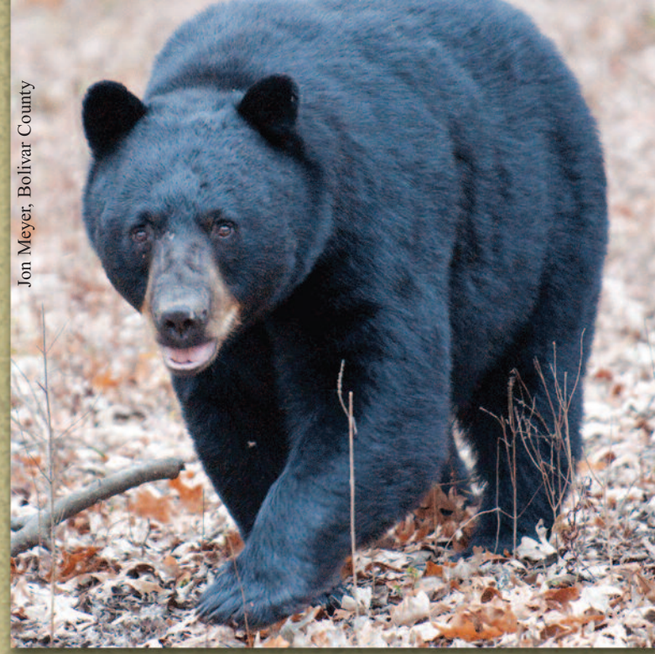
Sharkey County; MDWFP

Why not just relocate the bear causing the problem?
In order to move the bear, it must first be captured, immobilized, and then transported. This is a costly procedure that puts the bear at considerable risk. Also, moving a bear that has grown accustomed to unnatural foods does not solve the problem but merely moves it to another area. Additionally, bears have an amazing homing instinct and will almost always try to return to familiar territory. Along the way they cross unfamiliar territory and can wander into urban areas or cross busy roadways which can lead to fatal results for both bears and people.

Sharkey County; MDWFP

Who do I contact regarding a problem bear?
If you are experiencing problems with black bears or would just like to learn more information about bears in Mississippi, contact the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks at (601) 432-2199 or go online at www.mdwfp.com/bear. Recommendations and technical guidance will be provided which, if followed properly, will usually resolve any problems. **Remember, we all share in the responsibility of preventing conflicts with black bears.**

Printed by MDWFP • July 2016


Jon Meyer, Bolivar County

THE MISSISSIPPI Black Bear

Prepared by Black Bear Program
Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks

Mississippi's black bear population is growing. Documentation of newborn cubs combined with an increase in the number of bear sightings throughout the state leave little doubt that bears are slowly returning to our natural lands.

HISTORY

The black bear (*Ursus americanus*) has played an integral role in Mississippi's natural history. Native Americans relied on the black bear as a source of food, clothing, and goods for trade. As the land was settled, bears could still be found in great numbers and hunting of bears from horseback became a popular sport. The canebrakes and swamps of the Mississippi Delta gave rise to some of the earliest legends of bear hunting and attracted people from all over the country. Of course, no hunt is as famous as the Theodore Roosevelt hunt of 1902 in Sharkey County which led to the creation of the world's most popular children's toy: the Teddy Bear.

By the early 1900's, black bear numbers had been drastically reduced. The clearing of land for agriculture and overhunting through the years had reduced the state's bear population to less than a dozen animals by 1932. Black bears were classified as endangered throughout Mississippi in 1984. MDWFP biologists currently estimate Mississippi's bear population at around 150 animals.

THE MISSISSIPPI BLACK BEAR

Appearance: Black bears in Mississippi are generally black with a brown muzzle. Some bears exhibit a white patch of hair or "blaze" on their chest. Bears can grow to 6 feet in length and stand 3 feet tall at the shoulder. Average body weights are 150 to 350 lbs. for adult males and 120 to 250 lbs. for adult females although larger bears have been documented in Mississippi.

Habitat: Black bear habitat consists of escape cover, dispersal corridors, den sites, and a diversity of natural foods. Bears are highly adaptable but prefer large, remote blocks of bottomland hardwood forests. Most bear sightings in Mississippi occur in forested areas in close proximity to rivers or streams.

Home Range: Range sizes vary depending on habitat quality. The average home range for an adult male bear is roughly 20,000 acres while the average home range for an adult female is roughly 5,000 acres. Range sizes typically increase during the summer mating season and during fall when bears are foraging heavily to build fat reserves.

Greene County; MDWFP

Diet: Although classified as carnivores, black bears are not active predators. Up to 90% of a black bear's diet is composed of plant materials including acorns, berries, grasses, and agricultural crops. The majority of protein in a bear's diet comes from insects and carrion.

Denning: Black bears do not truly hibernate but rather go into a deep sleep that can begin in November and last until May. During this period, bears exhibit reductions in body temperature, metabolism, and heart rate but can be easily aroused if disturbed. Bears typically make their dens in hollow cypress or oak trees or in ground dens beneath fallen logs or logging debris.

Reproduction: Females generally breed for the first time at 3 years of age and will give birth every other year. Cubs are born in winter dens during January with litter sizes ranging from one to five. Cubs weigh only 8 ounces at birth but will weigh 4 to 5 pounds when they emerge from the den in April. Cubs will stay with their mother for 18 months before dispersing.

Wilkinson County; MDWFP

Behavior: Mississippi black bears are normally very shy and secretive animals and are not aggressive towards humans. Female bears, contrary to popular belief, are not typically aggressive in defense of their young. Although there has never been a documented attack on a person by a bear in Mississippi, black bears are wild animals and should always be treated with respect.

DISTRIBUTION

Generally speaking, black bears are currently found in three general areas within the state: the Gulf Coast, the Loess Bluffs of southwest Mississippi, and the Mississippi River Delta. It is believed that the majority of bears found in Mississippi are males that have dispersed from populations in other states at some point during their lives. In recent years however, females have been documented with greater frequency and there are currently three breeding subpopulations of black bears in the state.

Frequency of bear occurrences by county