

Bear Basics:

Facts About Mississippi's Black Bears

LITTLE DOUBT REMAINS THAT Mississippi's black bear population has risen over the last several years, not only due to the number of bear sightings within the state, but also the distribution of those sightings. Bear sightings historically occurred in portions of the delta, the south-western counties, and certain coastal counties, but we now see bears in other areas of the state. It is not unusual for bears to travel great distances in search of suitable habitat, and young males can travel hundreds of miles to establish their own territory. This "pilgrimage" can lead to bears crossing roadways, entering residential areas and taking an easy meal where they can find one. Generally speaking, older bears with a defined home range will steer clear of anything related to people. Radio-collared bears in the delta have shown us that bears will avoid people by using travel corridors that keep them out of sight. They learn what areas to avoid and when to move without being seen. In several cases we have seen bears living close to houses and farms without anyone ever being aware of their presence. But, of course, there are exceptions to the rule.

Black bears can best be described as "walking stomachs." They have an inefficient digestive system which forces them to

consume large amounts of food. Females with cubs are under increased pressure due to nutritional strains of nursing cubs. Sub-adult males that have recently dispersed from their mother's home range are in unfamiliar territory and have not yet learned where the best sources of food are in their new surroundings. Thus, these two bear groups are the most susceptible to causing conflicts with people.

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Throughout the southeast, the majority of a black bear's diet is comprised of plant material. During spring and summer months, bears eat a wide assortment of grasses, leaves, and berries until fall when they stock up on hard mast from oaks and hickories. Primary sources of protein in a bear's diet include insects and carrion. Especially dry years and/or mast crop failures will cause bears to expand their normal range in search of different food sources. This can lead bears into hunting camps and residential areas where the scent of garbage promises an easy meal.

Historically, the biggest conflict between bears and people has been damage to beehives. Because hives are confined to a small area, bears can cause thousands of dollars in damage in just one night. Since the majority of bee hives are located in remote areas away from people, they make easy targets for hungry



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bears. Many people think bears are after the sweet honey found inside the boxes, but the real treat are the protein-rich bee larvae.

The first step in solving nuisance problems regarding bears is prevention of the problem before it occurs. Removing attractants from hunting cabins, campgrounds, and houses in rural areas will keep bears in their rightful place and away from people. Things such as garbage, pet foods, and barbecue grills can be powerful enticements to a bear. Hauling garbage away from hunting camps and storing pet foods indoors can go a long way in preventing future problems. Bee keepers can prevent damage by surrounding bee yards with electrical fencing. And most importantly – never intentionally feed a black bear. Bears that learn to associate people with food can lose their natural fear of humans, which can create dangerous settings for both people and bears.

Because bears are so sparsely populated throughout Mississippi, there are very few reports of nuisance activity. Most people who report seeing bears or bear sign on their property likely have had a bear in the area for years without knowing it. However, as bear populations gradually increase over time, so too will interactions with humans. Simple steps and precautions taken now will go a long way in preventing future conflicts. As the old saying goes – an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

To learn more about black bears in Mississippi or to report a problem regarding bears, please contact Brad Young, Mississippi Museum of Natural Science, at 601-354-7303. **WI**

