



Bear Tracking in Mississippi

By Brad Young, Black Bear Program Leader

AS WILDLIFE BIOLOGISTS AND managers, we are expected to know the answers to almost any question that arises regarding Mississippi wildlife. Without a doubt, there are experts within our ranks that can provide answers and guidance on all manner of wildlife subjects ranging from the best warm-season plantings for deer to how many teeth are in an alligator's mouth. But what about an animal that is extremely scarce in the natural lands of our state? That is the problem we face when dealing with the Mississippi black bear. Black bears were almost wiped out in Mississippi in the early 1900s and numbers have remained low for the past 100 years. Not until recently have we noticed an increase in our state's bear population. Along with increasing bear numbers come increasing bear questions.

The object of the MDWFP black bear research program is to learn all that we can about our state's bears so that we can become better managers of our bear population. Without a doubt, black bears have been the subject of countless studies all over the country and those studies have certainly aided in our overall knowledge. But what about our bears? Mississippi has landscapes and habitats that are unique and therefore make our



bears unique. But with so few bears scattered throughout the state, how are we ever going to learn anything about them?

The first step is to catch them – a task much easier said than done! Once we have one captured we can begin our “work-up” which provides us quite a bit of information about the physical characteristics of the bear. Once the bear has been thoroughly measured and weighed, it is given unique ear tags and fitted with a tracking collar. The collar emits a signal that can be tracked from the ground or an airplane by using a receiver tuned to that collar's radio frequency. In addition to the “homing” beacon emitted, the collar also has a built-in Global Positioning System (GPS) unit which downloads precise locations of the bear's movements on a daily basis. The data stored within the collar provides us with information on daily movements, habitat preferences, home

range sizes, and denning periods which would be almost impossible to obtain otherwise.

Here are some interesting facts learned from Mississippi radio-collared bears:

☞ The average range for Mississippi bears appears to be about 50 square miles, although one big male in the Delta has shown a range of over 160 square miles.

☞ The longest documented trek by a bear through Mississippi was by a female and her yearling in the summer of 2007. The pair traveled almost 400 miles before settling on the Sunflower WMA.

☞ While not a true hibernator, black bears will often den for long periods of time in Mississippi. Collar data has shown that the denning period usually begins in December and lasts into early April.

☞ A female in Issaquena County spent just over a month gorging herself on saw-tooth oak acorns. Once she had gotten her fill, she immediately denned up for the winter.

☞ Mississippi bears use a variety of winter den sites including hollow trees, briar thickets, and old fields. Piles of logging slash are also very popular for slumbering bears.



☞ The largest bear documented in Mississippi weighed in at 420 lbs. That same bear weighed a “mere” 250 lbs less than two years before.

☞ The largest litter of cubs found in Mississippi is five, which ties the Southeastern record for largest black bear litter size.

☞ A large male was given ear tags in both ears during a work-up in 2005. That same male was recaptured in 2007 and had lost the tag in his right ear...along with the ear itself, which was apparently bitten off during a fight with another bear! **WI**