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Wildlife Issues

Wintertime for Mississippi Bears

By Brad Young, Black Bear Biologist

DO BLACK BEARS IN Mississippi hibernate?" In my travels throughout the state, this is certainly one of the more common questions that I am asked. Based on my research and experience with bears in the Magnolia State, my immediate answer to this question is invariably yes....and no.

To understand such an extremely vague answer to such a seemingly simple question, let's first analyze the characteristics of a "true hibernator." Hibernation is an adaptation to a lack of food. Food is required to maintain energy levels which, in turn, maintain normal body temperatures. During winter months when food is scarce, many mammals retreat

to dens or burrows for long periods of sleep. During this sleep, extreme reductions in heart rate, metabolism, and body temperature take place which allow these animals to conserve large amounts of energy. However, these animals

Bears do not eat or drink during their winter sleep, and all waste products are recycled internally.

are periodically required to raise their body temperatures and heart rates for bodily waste removal. Mammals such as bats and chipmunks can actually be handled during this time without being aroused. These are the "true hibernators" of the animal world.



Black bears exhibit many of these same characteristics, only to less extreme degrees.

During a bear's winter sleep (also called carnivorean lethargy) body temperatures decline, though usually [Cont. on 17]



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BLACK BEARS

[Cont. from 1] never more than 12 degrees. Metabolism rates are reduced to half that of active rates and heart rates can decline to 30 beats per minute. Because physiological processes are not reduced to the extent of a true hibernation, bears can be easily aroused if disturbed. Thus, it is definitely not a good idea to try and handle a sleeping bear! One of the most fascinating aspects of a bear's winter sleep is that they do not eat or drink during this period and all waste products are recycled internally.

Black bears in the Southeast typically have shorter denning periods than bears in more northern latitudes; likely because of greater food availability during winter months. Pregnant females are usually the first to den (usually during the first week of December) and the last to emerge from winter dens with newborn cubs in mid to late April. Males



are always the last to den and some juvenile males may not den at all or simply take a few "naps" for a week or so at a time in various places. Data gathered from radio-collared males in Mississippi show that most bears enter dens in late December/early January and typically do not emerge until the first week of April.

Mississippi black bears choose to den in a wide variety of locations and habitat types. Bears often choose large trees (typically cypress or overcup oak) with cavities to make their dens. These cavities can be hollow areas at the base of the tree or cavities left by broken limbs high above the ground. Some bears choose to make shallow "nests" in briar or cane thickets by raking leaves into a small pile usually at the base of a tree or fallen log. Another popular winter den site is within piles of logging slash or fallen tree tops. Whatever the type of den, they are almost always in inaccessible areas designed to limit disturbance by outsiders – particularly people. **WI**

DEER DATA ANALYSIS

[Cont. from 3] class. For does, the checklist emphasizes the total number harvested, percentage of does 3.5-years-old or older, average weight by age class, and average lactation by age class. One important number in the doe section of the report is the 2.5-year-old and older lactation, which indicates successful reproduction of mature does. The percentage of 3.5-year-old or older does in the harvest is an indication of inadequate antlerless harvest. Low harvest tends to stockpile older age class does. The percentage of the older age class in the harvest should be 40% or less.

Biologists also need to look at habitat quality and browse availability on each property in order to make the best recommendations. However, it is nearly impossible to visit all DMAP clubs we are responsible for every year; therefore, we must rely on data provided by the hunters in each club. The take home message is that we do not ask for anything on the DMAP data sheets



Biologists determine a deer's age by looking at its jawbone.

that we do not need. Every column and every space for each deer is important and will have an effect on next season's harvest recommendation. Without quality data we cannot give quality recommendations. Be as thorough as possible when recording deer data because everything we ask is important! **WI**

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