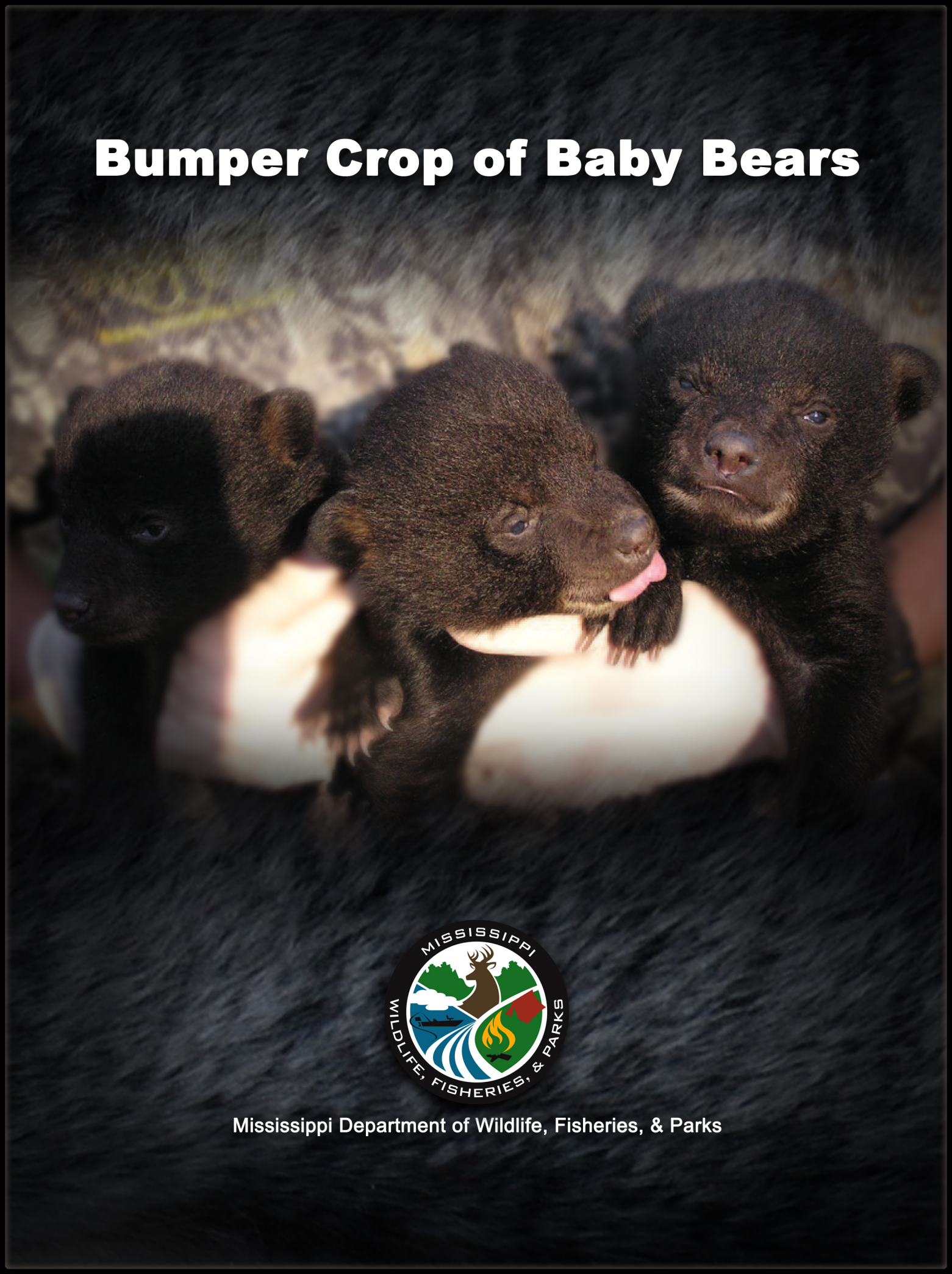
Bumper Crop of Baby Bears



Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, & Parks

A BUMPER CROP OF Baby Bears

By Brad Young

The Mississippi black bear population appears to be gaining a stronger foothold throughout the Delta region of the state. Mississippi Department of Wildlife,Fisheries, and Parks biologists, working in conjunction with researchers from Mississippi State University, documented an unprecedented number of bear cub births to Delta radio-collared females in 2011.

While it's true that most all wild animals produce offspring from year to year without much fanfare, the same couldn't always be said for black bears in Mississippi. In fact, there were absolutely no documented cases of black bears giving birth to cubs in Mississippi for a period of time spanning from the early 1970's until 2005. The reason for this "cub drought" is quite simple – no mother bears. For decades, Mississippi's bear population was abysmally low, ranging from 25 to 40 animals in the entire state. The few bears that did inhabit the state were primarily subadult males that had been pushed out of their former ranges in bordering states by older, larger males.

Females in Mississippi were basically nonexistent, and so the ability to naturally increase our bear population was also nonexistent. All of that changed in 2005, when a radio-collared female bear from Louisiana wandered into Wilkinson County and gave birth to five cubs and a new era in Mississippi black bear conservation and management was begun.

In order to understand what

makes the birth of a bear cub such a big deal, it's important to first understand a little about bear biology. Female black bears generally don't have their first litter of cubs until they are three to five years old. Once the female has been bred, the fertilized egg does not begin to develop but rather floats in suspension until the female's body determines if she is healthy enough to grow the fetus.

In other words, if the female is in poor health just before she enters her winter den, whether it is due to sickness or a seasonal food shortage, her body will not allow the additional nutritional burden of a cub and will abort the fertilized egg. This process (called delayed implantation) insures that the female is healthy enough to birth and nurse cubs in the coming year. Cubs are usually born in late January to early February in the female's winter den which can be a briar thicket, logging slash pile, or cavity in a hollow oak or cypress tree.

Litter sizes can range from one to five cubs with twins being the most common. The newborn cubs stay in the den with their mother until spring emergence which is usually around the first of April. The cubs will stay with their mother throughout the following year and den with her again the following winter. At about 18 months, the yearlings are sent into the world to make their own way and the female repeats the process. With such low reproductive potential, it's easy to see why bear populations are so slow to

Caption follows

grow, even in states with densities much higher than those here in Mississippi. Female black bears are very attentive mothers and cub survivability is usually very high, but with so few females scattered throughout the state, the birth of any cubs is an event in itself.

Black bear den checks are a biologist's way of determining population growth through natural reproduction from year to year. Although performed in the early spring, a den check actually begins in the summer when female bears are captured and fitted with tracking collars. Their movements are monitored throughout the fall until it is determined that they have gone to den for the winter months. Biologists then follow the signal and determine where the bear is denned and listen for the squeals of newborn cubs. At the first of March, after the cubs have had time to grow and mature a little more, biologists return to the den to conduct the actual check. The female is first given immobilizing drugs delivered by a modified dart fired from a safe distance. Once the drugs have taken effect, the female is given a complete biological work-up, her collar is refitted, and her cubs are weighed and measured. Cubs are also implanted with a very small microchip that allows researchers to identify them should they be captured in the years to come. Once all measurements have been taken and the cubs have been tagged, they are placed back in the den with their mother who is gradually waking up from her unplanned spring nap.

From 2005 to 2010, biologists documented six litters of cubs born to six different collared females throughout Mississippi. It was a positive sign that bear conservation efforts were paying off and our population was slowly beginning to naturally increase. Den checks conducted this past spring took us several more steps ahead. MDWFP and MSU biologists documented six more litters of cubs in the Delta region of the state. The litters were divided geographically with three occurring in Bolivar County along the Mississippi River while the other three were found in Sharkey, Issaquena, and Warren Counties in the south Delta. The litters yielded a total of 12 cubs nearly matching our state's total cub production for the past 40 years.

What we are witnessing is the natural recolonization of one of Mississippi's most iconic symbols. While nearly driven to extinction at one point in our state, the black bear is slowly returning to our wild lands. Habitat restoration and conservation education have allowed the black bear to once again call Mississippi home. With every new cub born, we move towards a day when the Mississippi black bear will no longer be called an endangered species.

Brad Young is MDWFP Black Bear Program Leader.

Know Your Target

Jon Meyer

Although den checks revealed an unprecedented number of bear cub births, the past year has not been without setbacks. A male bear in Coahoma County was mistakenly shot for a wild hog in the fall of 2010. In February 2011, two more bears were discovered dead with evidence suggesting that they were also shot. One of these deceased bears was a male bear found in western Hinds County while the other was a radio-collared female in Bolivar County. The loss of any female bear, especially one wearing a radio collar, is a significant loss to Mississippi's bear population and our research and management efforts.

Feral hog populations are increasing throughout Mississippi and landowners are well justified in attempting to control populations of hogs on their property. However, black bear populations are also increasing in many of the same areas and it is the responsibility of the landowner or hunter to positively identify their target before pulling the trigger. Black bears and feral hogs can closely resemble each other in heavy brush or in low light conditions, so please look carefully before you shoot.

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