

Black bears and the flood of 2011: Riding it out

By Brad Young, black bear program leader, Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks

The historic flood of 2011 has and will continue to have a tremendous impact on the landscape of the Mississippi Delta and the wildlife that live there. Countless species of wildlife were forced to leave their home ranges in search of higher ground. While this certainly caused stress to the affected wildlife, it is important to note that flooding is actually a natural part of the Mississippi Delta ecosystem. In fact, it is the driving force that created the Delta in the first place.

If there were ever a species of wildlife suited for survival in a flood-prone environment such as the Mississippi Delta, it would be the black bear. Long before the time of levee systems and river crest predictions, black bears thrived throughout areas of the state that were seasonally inundated with water. Even today, black bears prefer the bottomland hardwood forests that exist throughout the Mississippi Delta and are especially prevalent in the counties along the Mississippi River and the batture lands inside the levee.

Bears captured for research purposes over the past five years have been fitted with Global Positioning System (GPS) collars that record multiple locations per day over the life of the collar. Data retrieved from bears wearing these collars in areas of seasonal flooding have shown that bears rarely move from their home ranges even when there is little to no dry land available. Aerial telemetry surveys conducted on collared bears during the flood of 2011 have produced the same results. All collared bears in flooded areas of Sharkey and Issaquena Counties were still within their normal home ranges despite the fact that there was almost no dry

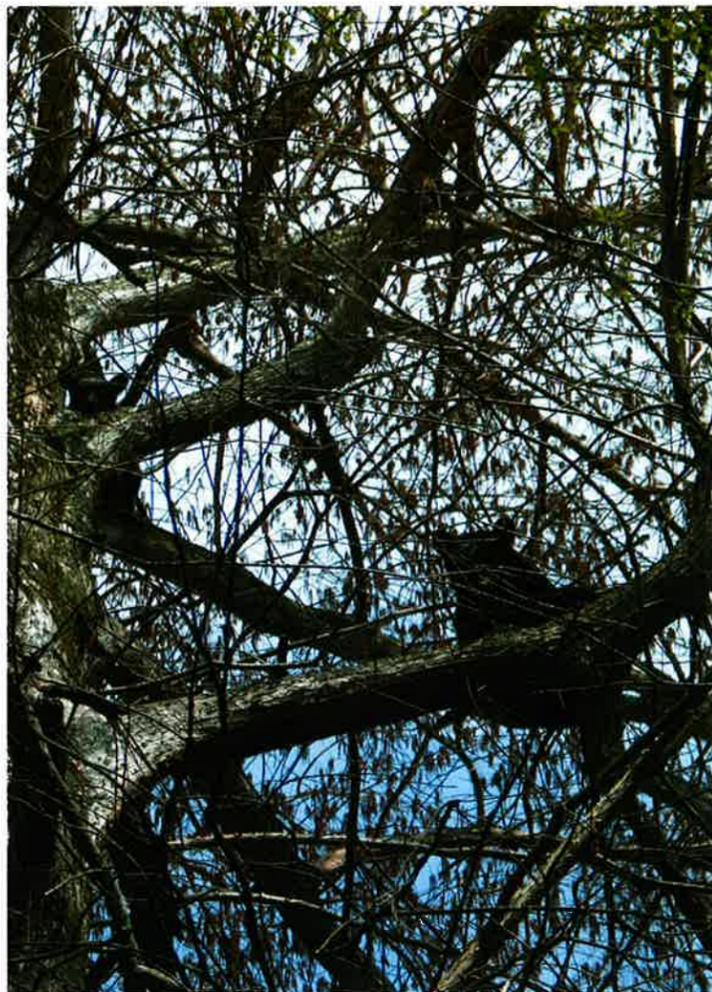


Photo: Jon Meyer

land available. As an added testament to a bear's flood resilience, the four radio-collared females in Bolivar County were actually located inside the Mississippi River levee!

It has long been an irrational fear that flood events would push bears into areas of human habitation as dry ground became scarcer and bears had to roam farther for dwindling food resources. While this is true of such species as white-tailed deer and feral hogs, it is important to note that the diet and physiological requirements for these species are very different from those of a black bear. Regardless of river stages, black bears are very shy and secretive animals that typically go out of their way to avoid humans.

One of the first advantages benefiting black bears during times of high water is the bear's ability to swim. Large paws in the front and rear make for excellent paddles. Combine these with powerful muscles and a buoyant frame and you have an animal that could give marathon swimmers a run for their money. It has been well documented

over the years that black bears routinely cross the Mississippi River between Mississippi, Louisiana, and Arkansas. While we see the river as a border between states and a dangerous obstacle full of swirling water and floating debris, a black bear just sees it as another part of its habitat.

Another adaptation to flooding is the bear's ability to climb trees. Black bears spend more time in trees than most people realize — even with dry ground beneath them. During winter, many bears intentionally den in large hollow trees over bodies of water to minimize disturbance during their long winter's sleep. Bears can often be found napping on

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large branches on a bright sunny day and will even build a "bear nest" from sticks and broken branches for a more comfortable perch in the tree. Obviously, bears are more than comfortable in trees and can easily move from treetop to treetop during prolonged flood events.

Bears are also exceptional foragers and can find food in almost any environment. As the flood waters rose, many species ranging from insects to snakes were forced to move into the trees to seek shelter. Insects are a vital source of protein in a bear's diet and floodwater makes them all the more accessible as the bears move from treetop to treetop. Even more important than insects to a bear's diet are berries, acorns, and other plant materials. While any berries and acorns will be under several feet of water during a flood, the tree canopy will have no shortage of newly formed leaves and leaf buds. Also worth noting is the fact that not all animals will survive a flood event as prolonged as what we have experienced in 2011. While not considered to be an active predator of other animals, a bear will certainly take advantage of an easy meal when it is available.

The flood of 2011 will have a lasting impact on the wildlife and habitats of the Mississippi Delta. But as the waters recede, MDWFP biologists fully expect to see those species of wildlife displaced by the high water moving back into their former ranges. Through the layers of river sediment, the forest floor will become green once again as new growth emerges. And for the Mississippi black bears, it will just be business as usual.

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