

Mississippi Black Bears: FACTS AND FICTION

By Brad Young, Black Bear Biologist, Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks

THE FACTS...

Mississippi is actually home to two subspecies of black bears. American black bears (*Ursus americanus*) are found in northern Mississippi while the Louisiana black bear (*Ursus americanus luteolus*) can be found in the southern two-thirds of the state. The distinction between the two subspecies has to do with subtle differences in the shape of the skull that are almost unrecognizable to the naked eye. Many people call Mississippi black bears “hog bears” or “honey bears” referring to a smaller-sized bear or a bear of a different color. Different color phases do exist among bears throughout the United States, although they are all considered to be black bears. Black bears were listed as endangered in Mississippi in 1984, and the Louisiana subspecies was listed as federally threatened in 1992. Today, biologists estimate the state’s bear population to be around 60 animals, primarily found in the Mississippi, Pearl, and Pascagoula River drainages.

Mississippi black bears are generally black with a brown muzzle and can sometimes have a white blaze of hair on their chests. Adult males weigh from 200 to 400 pounds while adult females can weigh from 120 to 200 pounds. Body lengths can range from 3 to 6 feet from nose to tail. Size typically varies based on quantity and quality of available foods in the area and the age of the animal.

Female bears usually begin having cubs when they are three to five years of age. Cubs (usually 2) are born in winter dens (hollow trees, logging slash piles, or ground “nests”) in January or February and do not emerge with their mother until April or May. Cubs will stay with their mother throughout the year and will den with her during the following winter. The family reemerges the following spring and will stay together until summer when the young disperse.

Black bears are not true hibernators but go through a period of winter dormancy called carnivorean lethargy. During this time, the bear exhibits a slower metabolism and will not eat, drink or eliminate waste from its body. All waste products are recycled through unique metabolic and physiological processes. Most bears are easily aroused if disturbed while denning.

Although the black bear is classified as a carnivore, they are not active predators. The majority (up to 95 percent in some areas) of a bear’s diet is comprised of seasonal plant materials such as grasses, acorns, and berries. The animal component of a bear’s diet is primarily insects, grubs, and carrion. Agricultural crops such as corn and wheat can also become components of a bear’s diet, especially in fragmented habitats.

Black bears prefer relatively large areas of forested habitat that provide escape cover, travel corridors, and a diversity of natural foods. Home range size for bears is influenced by sex, population density, food availability, and reproductive status. Movements by bears are based primarily on the search for food and for available mates during the breeding season. Male bears move much greater distances than females and can have home ranges of more than 40,000 acres while females may occupy an 18,000-acre range. Older male bears may force younger males out of their territory and cause them to disperse. This dispersal puts them at considerable risk as they cross roadways into unfamiliar territory and come into contact with humans.



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THE FICTION...


There are many misconceptions about Mississippi black bears. Because black bears have been largely absent from the woods of Mississippi for so long, many negative stereotypes have persisted and been passed down through the generations. Due to the fact that landowners and sportsmen have not had to share the land with these animals (or so they think), most people don't know that much about the true nature of black bears. The word bear conjures images of snarling beasts with giant fangs and stories of people being attacked while camping or hiking. Most of these negative associations come from stories about grizzly bears that are found nowhere near Mississippi. While grizzly bears are generally more aggressive by nature, black bears are actually very shy. Grizzly bears inhabit wide-open areas with little or no cover. Therefore, if a threat is encountered, a grizzly's only option in some cases is to fight. Black bears, on the other hand, inhabit dense forests with plenty of cover for hiding and avoiding threats, particularly people.

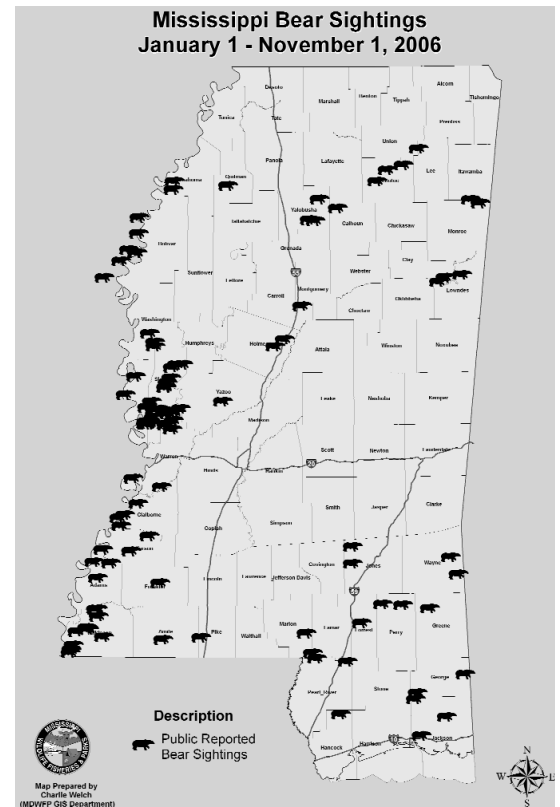
Truth be told, many people have had bears on their property at some point in time without ever knowing it. The Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks (MDWFP) receives countless calls every year from very surprised landowners and sportsmen who have taken photographs of bears by use of trail cameras set over bait. In all likelihood, the photographed bear had likely been in the area for years without anyone ever being aware of the bear's presence; a testament to their shy and secretive nature.

However, there is evidence that black bear populations are slowly increasing in Mississippi. Documented reports of bears are coming in from areas of the state where bears had not previously been found with any regularity. Additionally, in the last two years female bears that have immigrated into Mississippi from adjoining states have produced the first documented litters of cubs within the state in almost half a century.

Another misconception related to black bears in Mississippi has to do with restrictions placed on landowners in areas where bears are known to be present. Because of the black bear's protected status, many landowners and sportsmen fear that the presence of a bear on their property will restrict their property rights and usage of the land. Untrue. When the Louisiana black bear was listed as threatened under the terms of the Endangered Species Act, no critical habitat (i.e., a specific habitat deemed necessary for the survival of the species) was ever designated. In fact, the effects resulting from normal forest management activities were specifically exempted from the "harm" provisions of the Endangered Species Act.

Black bears are generalists and can adapt to many different environments. In actuality, common forestry practices are very necessary for promotion of good bear habitat. The maintenance of a diversity of age classes, stand types, and vegetative composition within a forest is the key to exceptional bear habitat. Also, recreational land uses such as hunting and fishing are in no way discouraged in areas known to harbor bears.

Today, biologists with MDWFP and other natural resource management agencies are working diligently to learn more about the bears that inhabit our state. By monitoring bears that have been captured and radio-collared, biologists can gain new insight into black bear movements, home range sizes, habitat preferences, reproduction, and population trends within Mississippi. Data collected will continue to aid in the future management of the species as bear populations continue to increase. To learn more about black bears in Mississippi or to report a bear sighting, please contact Brad Young at (601) 354-7303 or email at brad.young@mmns.state.ms.us 



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