What is the Black Bear Conservation Committee?

On October 3, 1990 the Black Bear Conservation Committee (BBCC) first convened at the Louisiana Forestry Association headquarters in Alexandria, Louisiana. This organization was formed to evaluate the status of the Louisiana Black Bear in its original, historic home range of Louisiana, western Mississippi, and eastern Texas.

This group is composed of professional resource managers representing the Louisiana Forestry Association, Louisiana Farm Bureau Federation, Louisiana Wildlife Federation, Louisiana Nature Conservancy, Delta Chapter (Louisiana) Sierra Club, U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Soil Conservation Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry, Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, Texas Forest Service, Mississippi Office of Forestry, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, and the Mississippi Department of Wildlife Fisheries, and Parks. Representatives from timber companies include wildlife biologists from Willamette Industries, James River Corporation, Temple-Inland Corporation, International Paper Co., Crawford and Bourland Forestry Consultants, and Anderson-Tully Co. Also on the committee are scientists from Louisiana Tech University, Louisiana State University, Mississippi State University, University of Tennessee, and Clemson University and the National Council of the Paper Industry for Air and Stream Improvement, Inc.

The BBCC's goal is to conserve and manage the Louisiana Black Bear in its native habitat. This is to be accomplished by conducting and supporting research into the current status of the bear and by informing the public about issues pertaining to this fascinating creature. This newsletter is directed toward this goal and we hope you enjoy it!

James M. Dyer, Editor
BBCC Newsletter
School of Forestry
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Ruston, LA
A Message from the BBCC Chairman:

The Black Bear Conservation Committee (BBCC) is proud to introduce this first issue of "The Black Bear Conservation Committee Newsletter." Its purpose is two-fold: 1) to keep the public informed about issues related to a wildlife species of special concern in the lower Mississippi River Valley, and 2) to keep the public up-to-date about the efforts of the Black Bear Conservation Committee to address bear management and recovery to suitable habitats throughout its historic range.

On July 19, 1990, the Louisiana Forestry Association (LFA) hosted a meeting in Alexandria, Louisiana to discuss black bear ecology, management, and the implications of the proposal by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to list as threatened the Louisiana subspecies. At that meeting, Dr. Michael Pelton of the University of Tennessee and national authority on the black bear, reiterated his statement at an earlier Black Bear Workshop relative to the Louisiana Black Bear: "The primary responsibility for insuring the future survival and habitat of present black bear in the Southeast Coastal Plain, and Louisiana specifically, shall fall on a number of public and private agencies that control the lands containing black bear habitat or potential habitat. To do so will take a concerted and coordinated effort among these groups." This concept of a regional effort formed to develop management strategies for increasing black bear numbers throughout its historical range was adopted by the LFA Wildlife and Recreation Committee who in turn initiated information of the Black Bear Conservation Committee.

The Black Bear Conservation Committee represents a broad-based effort by landowners and representative from state and federal agencies, private conservation groups, forest industry, agricultural organizations, and the academic community to work together for management and recovery of a wildlife species. The proposal by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to list the Louisiana Black Bear as threatened under the Endangered Species Act brought to the forefront the need to actively address management and recovery of the bear. However, formation of the BBCC is a positive action to benefit the resource, rather than a reaction to this proposal. The BBCC represents a precedent-setting opportunity for the way natural resources issues are addressed; by serving as an avenue for both public and private sectors to work together in the best interest of the resource.

I am most impressed by the Committee's progress to date. Four key areas of concentration - management, education and information, research, and funding - have been identified and subcommittees established for each. Research priorities have

been established and a regional team of scientists are working to coordinate their efforts, thereby avoiding unnecessary duplication of effort and getting the most for each dollar invested. The BBCC is a voluntary organization, bonded together by a common concern for the resource. Through the continued commitment of the individuals, organizations, companies, and agencies represented, I believe the Black Bear Conservation Committee will result in a beneficial situation for landowners, public user groups, and the resource itself.

Jimmy Bullock
Chairman, BBCC
Anderson-Tully Co.
Vicksburg, MS
Bear Facts:


Description:

The black bear is a large, stocky, short-tailed mammal which, in the eastern United States, is dark brownish-black. Adults usually stand from 3 to 3.5 feet at the shoulder, are 4.5 to 6.25 feet long, and weigh between 198 and 400 pounds.

February of the following year. Females usually have a litter every other year. The cubs leave the den with their mother at about two months of age. They remain with her throughout the summer and apparently den with her the following winter. Female black bears mature and can have their first litter in three years, but most are five to seven years of age before having their first young.

Female black bears occupy a home range that may be as small as 640 acres in excellent habitat to as large as 6400 acres in less suitable habitat. Male home ranges are usually much larger and may overlap that of several females. A study in Louisiana indicated that the minimum home range of two adult males averaged 27,440 acres while that of two adult females was 4,866 acres.

Black bears eat a wide variety of foods, but the diet is primarily vegetable matter, including grasses, fruits, seeds, nuts and roots. Insects, fish, amphibians, small rodents, birds, eggs, and carrion are also eaten. Most foraging takes place during the evening and early morning hours, although occasionally black bears are active during the day.

It is not known whether in the southeast U.S. black bears become inactive for a long period of time during the winter as they do in colder parts of the range. A Louisiana study indicated that at least three of five bears under observation became inactive for at least short periods of time. The winter sleep of black bears is not considered true hibernation because body temperature remains normal, the pulse rate is not lowered, and breathing, although slowed, is still more frequent than in true hibernating species. It is thought that in warmer parts of the range, black bears retire to sleep for only a few days at a time and then leave the den for short periods. In the south, dens may be in road culverts, hollow logs, or tree cavities. These tree cavities are in large, old trees and may have openings from near ground level to as high as 90 feet or more above the ground.

Courtesy of: Endangered Species of Mississippi
Mississippi Dept. of Wildlife Conservation
Museum of Natural Science

Classification and Status of the Louisiana Subspecies:

While there is some indication that the black bear residing in Louisiana and Mississippi may be a distinct subspecies, (*Ursus americanus luteolus*), it is not clear whether or not this is the case. Morphometric (structural) characteristics of some bear skulls taken from this region suggest there might indeed be a separate subspecies, however.

Range:

*Ursus americanus* formerly occurred over most of Canada, the United States, and the mountains of northern Mexico. In the eastern United States, it now occurs in northern Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan, in New England, New York, and Pennsylvania south through the Appalachians to northern Georgia, in most of Florida, along the Gulf Coast to central Louisiana, and north to the Ozark Mountains of Missouri and Arkansas.

Life History and Ecology:

Black bears mate in June or early July, and a litter of one to five young (usually two) are born in January or early
genetic analyses of blood and hair samples do not indicate a
distinction between the LA/MS populations and bears from other
parts of the U.S. To further compound the issue, 161 bears
from Minnesota were released in two areas in Louisiana between
1964 and 1967. Whether or not breeding between these bears
and resident bears occurred is not known.

Because of the questionable status of a distinct
subspecies of black bear in this region, the U.S. Fish and
Wildlife Service has proposed to list all bears within the
historic home range of the Louisiana black bear as a
threatened species under the Endangered Species Act. This
historic home range includes Louisiana, eastern Texas and
western Mississippi.

Selected References:

Lowery, G.H., Jr. 1974. The Mammals of Louisiana and
its Adjacent Waters. Louisiana State University Press,

Mammals of Missouri. University of Missouri Press,
Columbia. 356 pp.

Black Bears in the Southeast: Reasons for Concern and
Optimism:

Black bears once occupied all the physiographic regions
of the Southeast; wherever forests occurred, bears occurred.
The species now occupies two of the four major physiographic
regions, the mountains and coastal plain. For the most part, bears
no longer occur in ridge and valley or piedmont regions.
Extensive land clearing and human developments have altered
the landscapes of the Southeast eliminating forest cover and
squeezing the species into less than 10% of its former range.
Most areas presently supporting viable bear populations are
publicly owned or controlled lands where human impacts are
minimal, i.e. national forest, parks, refuges, or state lands.
However, the species is still found on some large private
commercial forests, primarily in the coastal plain.

Black bears require a higher degree of remoteness or
seclusion than many species and their feeding requirements
also dictate that they have a relatively large home range. In
one form or another, both the mountains and coastal plain
provide these two basic ingredients. Low human population
densities, limited access, thick shrub and rugged topography
provide seclusion/remoteness. The above four components vary
in quality across the Southeast. When all four are present
and the area encompasses the annual food needs for the
species, primarily soft and hard mast, one can expect a
viable, healthy bear population. If one or more are lacking,
a population will be more vulnerable, less resilient, and
lower in density. On occasion one component may compensate
for another; for example, an area with a sparse shrub cover
may have a high degree of limited human access or vice versa.

At present six southeastern states have populations of
black bears that can be harvested through recreational hunting
- Arkansas, Tennessee, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, and
Virginia. Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Kentucky, South
Carolina and Texas have closed seasons on the species at the
present time. Recent increased interest in the commercial
value of certain bear parts (i.e. gall bladders, claws) has
concerned some state agencies, particularly if their bear
populations are limited. Also continued loss of bear habitat
due to expanding human populations, i.e. Florida, is further
reason for concern for this species in the region. As
populations become squeezed tighter and tighter into
increasingly isolated enclaves, concern grows over the future
viability of such populations. Can they survive in such
isolation without human intervention? Will populations simply
disappear because of demographic rather than genetic reasons?
Can these populations be permanently linked together through
viable corridors such as river or ridge systems? These and
other important questions need to be addressed if we are to
develop a sound conservation strategy for the species in the Southeast.

At the same time there is concern about losing some populations, there is also hope of expanding or even re-establishing others. The premier example of re-establishing and expanding a population is the bears in the Arkansas highlands where the population not only was re-established but has expanded throughout the Ouachita and Ozark National Forests and into eastern Oklahoma and southern Missouri. Tennessee and Kentucky are initiating efforts to re-establish bears in the Big South Fork area on the border of those two states. Virginia is discussing the possibility of putting bears into a Piedmont area of their state. Some bottomland coastal areas that were cleared for agricultural crops are being converted back to hardwood forests. For an array of reasons (waterfowl, biodiversity, etc.), progress is being made toward preserving wetlands, riverine corridors, swamps, etc. that will serve as dispersal corridors for bears in the future. More and more concern is being expressed by agencies, organizations, and individuals when developments (landfills, housing developments, etc.) infringe on bear habitat. With closer monitoring of our current populations, initiating conservation easements and outright purchasing of vital linkages or important tracts, limiting human impacts on currently occupied habitats, and reintroducing bears into currently unoccupied habitats, we may be able to ensure the future for this species into the 21st century. If we can insure the future of this animal, we will have done so for many other species that reside within these same habitats in the Southeast.

Michael R. Pelton
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Dept. of Forestry, Wildlife & Fisheries
University of Tennessee
Knoxville, TN

Louisiana Black Bear Research Program on the Tensas River National Wildlife Refuge:

The Louisiana black bear once was abundant in eastern Texas, Louisiana, and southern Mississippi, particularly in the expansive bottomland hardwood forests of the Lower Mississippi Alluvial Plain. Extensive habitat loss and human exploitation resulted in a decline in bear populations throughout their range, which was eventually confined to core populations in the Atchafalaya and Tensas River Basins in Louisiana, and minor populations in southeast Louisiana and west and south Mississippi. The Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) released Minnesota bears into the Atchafalaya and Tensas River Basins in the mid-sixties in an effort to boost dwindling populations. The effect of these introductions on the native bear subspecies was uncertain. In 1987, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) was petitioned to list the Louisiana black bear as an endangered subspecies. Concern over the taxonomic and population status of the bear and the lack of available management information prompted the FWS to initiate research in the Tensas Basin in 1987. Research was coordinated with LDWF, University of Tennessee, and Louisiana State University. The study was designed to document ecological and biological data for the development of a sound management strategy for perpetuation of the bear resource, and to assess the taxonomic and population status of the bear in response to the listing petition.

Spring-activated cable foot snares baited with beef scraps and cane syrup were used to trap bears for study. Each captured bear was tagged, lip-tattooed, weighed, measured, and equipped with an activity-sensitive radio transmitter in a break-away collar attachment. A small, nonfunctional premolar tooth was extracted for age determination and hair, blood, and tissue samples were collected. Blood chemistry, hematology, and parasite analyses were performed on blood samples and genetic tests were conducted with blood and tissue.

A Radio-Collared Bear on the Tensas River National Wildlife Refuge
(Photo courtesy of USFWS)
Twenty-five bears (12 males and 13 females) were captured during April 1988 to November 1990. Bears were telemetrically monitored up to three times weekly over periods of up to three years. Captured bears ranged in weight from 36-400 pounds; females ranged from 64-284 pounds. Captured bears ranged in age from cubs to 15 years old. Female bears' home ranges generally were smaller than males, some of which traveled 25 air miles from their captured sites and covered up to 40,000 acres (forest and open land) in their ramblings. Bear often used wooded corridors as travel pathways when moving between forested tracts. Activity was primarily from dusk to dawn although daytime activity was not uncommon. Daytime rest sites were usually ground beds scratched out on the forest floor in areas of thick cover. Areas of recent logging activity were utilized for foraging, bedding, denning, and escape cover. Food items consumed by bears were diverse and included: grasses, grains, corn, insects, berries, fruits, nuts, and carrion. Winter denning usually occurred by late January and den emergencies ranged from March to May. Some bears however, particularly juveniles and adult males, remained semi-active throughout the winter. Bears used hollow trees over water (cypress and overcup oak), as well as brushpiles and ground nests for winter dens. Ground dens were normally located in logging slash or in thick vegetative regrowth in logged area. Cubs were born in January and February and litter size ranged from 1-3.

Results of genetic and morphological investigations into the taxonomic status of the Louisiana black bear indicate that the introduction of the Minnesota bear apparently had no detectable effect on the native subspecies. The population estimate of the Tensas Basin stands at about 60-100 bears; the statewide population count remains speculative. Vulnerability to habitat loss (over 80% of the bear's habitat was destroyed by 1980) and illegal kill (11 bears or more may have been killed during 1988-1991 in Louisiana and Mississippi) are cited as possible threats to the continued existence of the subspecies.

Keith M. Weaver
Wildlife Biologist
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Tensas River National Wildlife Refuge
Tailulah, LA

Mississippi. What made this discovery of added interest was the radio collar found next to the skull. Although there are plans to radio collar Mississippi bears, none had been collared so far. Almost certainly this bear had been part of a research project being conducted in Louisiana.

Keith Weaver, who initiated the black bear research program at Tensas River National Wildlife Refuge near Tallulah, Louisiana reported that he had lost contact with a bear in June 1990. The two year old male bear weighing 106 pounds had been captured for the first time in October 1989 and was fitted with a radio tracking collar. Tom Edwards, who now heads the black bear project at Tensas NWR and biologists with the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks investigated the site where the skull and collar were discovered. Additional skeletal material was uncovered as well as one of the bear's metal ear tags, confirming that this bear was the one Weaver had lost. This bear was over 40 air miles from its original point of capture.

Research has shown that at two years of age male bears may travel great distances to establish a territory of their own. When bears explore new areas they frequently choose river bottomlands as travel corridors, probably due to the cover, food and potential den sites provided by these dense areas. This behavior would explain the presence of this bear in Mississippi. The Big Black River has apparently served as a travel corridor in the past. In the 1960's the Big Black River was believed to be one of the main corridors used by bears released in Louisiana as they moved from their release sites. Sighting reports and the well documented cases of tagged Louisiana black bears in both Raymond and Canton, Mississippi may be examples of this movement.

The fate of this particular bear is a classic example of the dangers encountered as bear attempt to establish a home range in unfamiliar territory. It also stresses the difficulties facing resource managers as they begin developing a management plan for an animal as mobil as the black bear. Although poaching is suspected, the cause of the bear's death is unknown at this time.

Cathy Shropshire
Mississippi Dept. of Wildlife, Fisheries & Parks
Jackson, MS

Tensas Bear Found in Mississippi:

Last September the skeletal remains of a black bear were discovered near the Big Black River in Claiborne County.
River National Wildlife Refuge near Tallulah, LA. Hosting the tour was Mr. Keith Weaver, a biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, who has conducted extensive bear research on the refuge.

Mr. George Chandler, Refuge manager, welcomed everyone to Tensas River National Wildlife Refuge and gave a brief history of the refuge. Following an audio/visual presentation covering the establishment, purpose, and management of Tensas Refuge, Mr. Dan Tabberer, forester on the Tensas Refuge, discussed reforestation and forest management. The group then adjourned to the field for the remainder of the afternoon.

The first stop on the field trip was at the refuge seed storage facility and an adjoining field planted to mixed hardwoods. Mr. Tabberer continued the discussion on seed storage and reforestation and answered questions for the audience.

The tour then moved to one of the walking trails on the refuge. Mr. Weaver gave an overview of the bear research on Tensas and demonstrated the radio-telemetry equipment used to monitor bear movements. At various stops along the trail, Mr. Weaver demonstrated/discussed bait station set-ups and the various techniques used to trap bears. Of particular interest was a detailed discussion of the snare technique, and the procedure for handling a bear once captured.

The final stop was a visit to a bear den location on nearby lands owned by Deltic Farm and Timber Co., Inc. Mr. Weaver and Mr. H. E. "Bubba" Perry, forest manager for Deltic, discussed bear ecology for that particular area, with emphasis on denning. Following a final discussion and question/answer session, the meeting adjourned at 6:00 p.m. for the evening.

The BBCC extends a special thanks to George Chandler, Dan Tabberer, Keith Weaver, and H. E. Perry for hosting an excellent field trip, and for their presentation, comments, and courtesy throughout.

Louisiana Landowner Recognized for Black Bear Contributions:

Deltic Farm & Timber, Inc., a large private land holding company in northeast Louisiana, has been recognized by the Black Bear Conservation Committee as its first award recipient for a landowner or individual contributing significantly toward the enhancement and restoration of this unique species.

Deltic owns and manages approximately 8,000 acres of bottomland hardwood forest in Madison and East Carroll Parishes, Louisiana. These holdings when added to the Tensas River National Wildlife Refuge, represent a core of black bear habitat containing the highest density of black bears found in the southeast. They also own and administer another 57,000 acres of farmland and timberland.

Management of these lands through careful timber harvest, rigid protection, and a tolerant attitude toward the occasional depredation of the company’s agricultural crops by bears, has significantly enhanced the survival chances for this species. In addition, Deltic has cooperated extensively with research personnel from Tensas River National Wildlife Refuge and other research personnel in telemetry and other habitat-related studies. Deltic is planting marginal farmland back to bottomland hardwoods and has in place a cooperative agreement to manage some of its wetlands for waterfowl.

Deltic Farm & Timber, Inc. is also an agricultural leader in minimum tillage, grassed waterways, and other farm-related conservation practices.

The Black Bear Conservation Committee, in selecting Deltic Farm & Timber, Inc. as its initial award recipient, will present an original black bear print drawn by Ruston, LA, artist, Albino Hinojosa.
A Young Man's "Bear Story":

The following is a true story of a young man's encounter with a black bear in Northwest Mississippi. The story is by Kenny Wise and the BBCC would like to thank Kenny and his grandfather, Willie Compassi, for their assistance and interest in black bears. With the help of concerned citizens like Kenny and Willie, researchers can gather baseline information about bears in the Southeast U.S. and hopefully begin expanding and re-establishing bears in their native habitat.

"I was in a climbing tree stand on the edge of a grassy clearing just before dark. I was trying to bag my first deer with a bow and arrow and I was feeling lucky. The deer came out of the woods from my right about 30 yards away. She entered the clearing twitching her tail, licking her lips and looking around; but she kept coming. I noticed the mist laying behind her as I released the arrow. I felt like it was a good shot. She ran into the opening and I lost sight of her. I knew I had to wait before going after her so I went back to the camp to get my uncle. He was an old hand in this area and I wanted his help to track the deer. We came back in about five minutes. When we came up to the clearing, we could see the deer about 60 yards away. Beside it was a full grown black bear. The bear stood up on its hind legs and looked at us. I was feeling awe, excitement, fear and amazement all at once. The bear dropped to all fours and took several steps toward us; then stopped. I knew bears had poor eye sight, and felt that she was just trying to identify us. She then ambled off a bit but never left the clearing. I had heard that there were bears in the area but never expected the privilege of seeing one. I removed my stand from the tree and left the bear with "its' game."

"My grandfather was very interested in the bear and we went back the next day and found two sets of tracks. At Christmas he gave me a plaster-of-paris cast of the bear tracks. My grandfather is always talking about the bears he has seen in the area and signs he finds. He takes visitors to the areas in hope they too can experience this amazing animal. We had many discussions about the bears; how many there are, where they come from, and if they stay for long. Most sightings are in the fall and we are curious if they move into this area from across the river where we know there is a large population. Are they here because they are preparing for hibernation and are more active or are there just more people in the woods at this time of year to see them?"

"We heard of the black bear research being done at Mississippi State University and presented Dr. Leopold with the casts and offered him access to the bears for research."

"I feel that most people are scared of the bears, do not understand them, or just want to kill them out of ignorance or to prove to someone they saw one. I would like to have more information made available to the public about the bears to help us dispel the myths and maybe we can increase the bear population in our area and the rest of the state."
YOU CAN HELP:

If you would like to participate in the effort to restore the Louisiana Black Bear please consider contributing in one of the following ways.

1. The BBCC is offering signed and numbered prints of the bear scene depicted on the cover of this newsletter. For your contribution of $25 or more we will send you one of these beautiful 11" x 17" prints.

2. We are also offering 4" x 4" stickers of the BBCC logo (located in the upper right-hand corner of the cover). These peel-off stickers make ideal bumper or window stickers for your vehicle and are available for $5 apiece.

If you would like to help us, fill in the appropriate information, remove this page along the dotted line, enclose payment and mail to:

Black Bear Conservation Committee
P O Box 52477
Shreveport, LA 71135

Yes - I would like ________ prints at $25 (or more) apiece.

Yes - I would like ________ stickers at $5 apiece.

Total Payment ________

Please allow 2 weeks for delivery. Thank you

My address is: