# Louisiana Black Bear

Scientific Name: *Ursus americanus luteolus*

Federal Status: Endangered, 2/17/92• State Status: Threatened

## Description

The Louisiana Black Bear is one of 16 currently recognized subspecies of American Black Bear. This subspecies is a large, bulky mammal with long black hair and a short, well-haired tail. The facial profile is rather blunt, the eyes small, and the nose pad broad with large nostrils. The muzzle is yellowish-brown with a white patch sometimes present on the lower throat and chest. There are five toes with short, curved claws on the front and hind feet. Adult males may weigh 300 to 400 pounds or more, and adult females 120 to over 180 pounds. Body length of adults ranges from 4 to 7 feet. Louisiana black bear skulls, when contrasted with other black bear skulls, are relatively long, narrow, and flat, and have proportionately large molar teeth.

*Louisiana Black Bear*


## Distribution and Habitat

The Louisiana Black Bear was once a common inhabitant of forested regions of eastern Texas, Louisiana and Mississippi. According to the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service Recovery Plan for the species (1995), the Louisiana Black Bear occurred in all Texas counties east of and including Cass, Marion, Harrison, Upshur, Rusk, Cherokee, Anderson, Leon, Robertson, Burleson, Washington, Lavaca, Victoria, and Refugio.

According to survey work by Bailey in 1905, black bears were considered as being rare throughout Texas at the beginning of the twentieth century. Their last strongholds in eastern Texas were in the swamps and thickets of the Big Thicket Region of southeast Texas. According to Schmidly (1983) the majority of the final remaining bears were exterminated from this area during the period between 1900, to 1940.

Presently the Louisiana black bear primarily occurs within the boundaries of the state of Louisiana. The largest concentrations are in the Atchafalaya and Tensas River Basins. There are occasional movements, primarily of solitary juvenile males, into western Mississippi, and eastern Texas. A resident breeding population does not currently exist in Mississippi or eastern Texas; however this could occur at some point in the future. Some professionals think that this subspecies may also occur in portions of southeast Arkansas. Ongoing genetics research will answer this question sometime in the near future.

Black bear populations in the neighboring states of Arkansas, Louisiana and Oklahoma are stable or increasing. Concurrently, the frequency of occurrence of black bears, primarily dispersing juvenile males, within eastern Texas is on the increase. This has been documented in the Red River and Sulphur River Basins in northeast Texas, and at other locations in eastern Texas. There have been some 24 confirmed black bear sightings within eastern Texas since 1977. There have been reliable black bear sightings in the following counties: Anderson, Angelina, Bowie, Cass, Fannin, Franklin, Harrison, Henderson, Hopkins, Jasper, Lamar, Marion, Morris, Nacogdoches, Newton, Panola, Polk, San Jacinto, and Shelby Counties. Approximately 67 percent of these sightings have occurred since 1990. Additionally, approximately 70 percent of these sightings have occurred within the northeastern counties of eastern Texas. Several of these sightings involved direct observations of a black bears, and one involved a road-killed black bear along Interstate Highway 30 east of Mount Vernon, Texas, on the Franklin-Hopkins County Line when a black bear was struck by a tractor-trailer rig in 1999.

Louisiana Black Bear (*Ursus americanus luteolus*), and American Black Bear (*U. americanus*) have been given the same protection within the historic range of the Louisiana black bear in eastern Texas, and both subspecies will essentially be treated as the *U. luteolus* subspecies. All free-ranging black bear subspecies within the historic range of Louisiana Black Bear are federally listed as threatened due to similarity in appearance, and given the same legal protection.

Key habitat requirements of black bears include food, water, cover, and denning sites spatially arranged across sufficiently large, relatively remote blocks of land. Louisiana black bears typically inhabit bottomland hardwood forests but also utilize other types of forested habitats. Other documented habitat types used include brackish and freshwater marshes, salt domes, wooded spoil levees along canals and bayous, and agricultural fields. Although black bears originally occurred throughout the lower southeastern coastal plain, bear densities were probably historically greater within bottomland hardwood and other forested communities where hard (acorns and nuts) and soft mast (berries and fleshy fruits) production was higher than in the fire-maintained, pine-dominated upland communities.

Remoteness is an important spatial feature of black bear habitat. In the southeast, remoteness is relative to forest tract size and the presence of roads. Forest tract size and the number of roads reflect the likelihood of human disturbance that can limit habitat suitability and use.

Quality cover for bedding, denning and escape is very significant as forests become smaller and more fragmented, and as human encroachment and disturbance to habitats increases. Black bears are adaptable and opportunistic, and can

survive in proximity to humans if afforded areas of retreat that minimize chance of close contact or visual encounters.

The federal listing of the Louisiana Black Bear was made without formally designating critical habitat. In addition, a special rule was included allowing for normal forest management activities to continue within the bear's range.

## Life History

Although classified as carnivores, bears are not usually active predators, and have an omnivorous diet consisting primarily of vegetable matter. They are opportunistic feeders, eating almost anything that is readily available. Hard and soft masts like acorns and berries, carrion, and insect larvae found in dead and decaying wood are typical food sources. However, agricultural crops like corn, wheat and sugarcane may also be utilized. Bears are considered to be very intelligent animals. They are basically shy and secretive, and usually intentionally avoid contact with humans. Conversely, bears have a keen sense of smell, and will locate and feed on human garbage. This tendency can sometimes create problems with humans. Proper management of human garbage, making it inaccessible to bears, can minimize this problem, and is paramount to successful conservation of this species.

Males typically have larger home ranges than females, and are usually solitary except during the breeding period. The breeding period occurs during the summer. Females usually begin breeding at 3 to 4 years of age. Female black bears undergo induced ovulation and delayed implantation, and have a gestation period lasting between 7 and 8 months. Usually 1 to 3 black bear cubs are born every other year around mid-January, to mid-February. An average litter size is typically 2 cubs, but 3- to 4-cub litters are not uncommon. Cubs remain with their mother the first year, and then disperse to establish their own territories usually during their second summer. Cubs are vulnerable to a number of threats, and juvenile mortality can be high.

## Threats and Reasons for Decline

Decline of this species, throughout its range, was due to depletion of populations through over harvest by humans, and to loss and fragmentation of suitable forested habitats. Presently human population density with its high potential for human/bear conflicts is probably the most significant threat. Continued alteration, conversion and fragmentation of forested habitats throughout its range, including eastern Texas, are equal, if not greater threats to the long-term survival of the species.

## Recovery Efforts

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) formally listed the Louisiana Black Bear as threatened on February 7, 1992. The Service published the Louisiana Black Bear Recovery Plan in 1995. This plan was designed to assure long-term conservation of the black bear and its habitat within Louisiana. This plan was basically designed to maintain current black bear populations within the Atchafalaya and Tensas Basins and adjacent areas, and to create suitable bottomland hardwood habitat corridors to link these two populations. The goal is for these populations to be connected, and self-sustaining.

Field studies by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department from 1994 through 1996 (Garner and Willis, 1998) used a Habitat Suitability Index to analyze 4 potential habitat areas in eastern Texas for suitability for black bears. Area A included a significant portion of the Sulphur River and its tributary White Oak Creek; Area B included the Middle Neches River Corridor; Area C included the Lower Neches River Corridor; and Area D included the Big Thicket National Preserve. Each of these areas provided suitable habitat and food sources, but areas A, C and D had a high occurrence of potential human/bear conflict zones. Area B, the Middle Neches River Corridor, had a much lower potential for human/bear conflicts, and was thus the most suitable potential habitat for black bears identified in the study.

Additional ongoing measures by the Department, Service and their cooperators to assure conservation of this species in eastern Texas include: (1) Minimizing loss of suitable forested habitats, particularly mature bottomland hardwood forests; (2) Promoting reforestation programs (including TPWD's Landowner Incentive Program, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Partners for Wildlife Program, East Texas Wetland Project, and numerous USDA Farm Bill Programs) that create or restore areas of new habitat for the species; (3) Monitoring and documenting movements of black bears into Texas from populations in Arkansas, Louisiana and Oklahoma; (4) Developing management strategies to protect and conserve black bears that move into Texas from bordering states (in addition to current protection by federal and state law); (5) Continuing participation in the interstate Black Bear Conservation Committee as a conservation partner for the species throughout its range; and (6) developing and implementing programs to educate the public about this species, its biology, and its management.

Department staff and a coalition of partners including state and federal agency biologists, forest products industry biologists, non-governmental conservation professionals, citizen groups, landowners and a number of private sector stakeholders are currently engaged in preparing a management plan for black bears within eastern Texas. This is an on-going process that has had, and will continue to have input from a number of stakeholders that will ultimately provide well-defined guidelines and strategies for long-term conservation of this species within the region.

In addition to the efforts previously discussed, the Black Bear Conservation Committee (BBCC), formed in 1990, is a regional non-governmental organization focused on the restoration of the Louisiana black bear throughout its historic range in Louisiana, Mississippi, and eastern Texas. The BBCC is a coalition of very diverse parties, or stakeholders with an interest in the Louisiana black bear, and has brought together people that previously had adversarial roles, and created a cooperative working environment. The BBCC, whose headquarters is in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, has been actively engaged in Louisiana black bear conservation for the past thirteen years. They have been actively working with governmental agencies, forest product companies, non-governmental organizations and private landowners

within occupied black bear habitats, and habitats that could potentially become occupied. In addition to providing direct management assistance, the BBCC spends significant energies educating the public about the plight of this threatened species. BBCC is currently engaged in the coalition to prepare a management plan for black bear in eastern Texas. In addition, the BBCC published a Black Bear Conservation Plan in 1997 to restore this species throughout its entire historic range.

## Where To See Louisiana Black Bear

There are currently no well-defined populations of black bears within the boundaries of eastern Texas. Black bears in eastern Texas have largely been considered as nomadic wandering males visiting or moving in from adjacent states. A person wanting to see Louisiana black bears in the wild, a difficult task at best, would have greater chance of success by going to the Tensas River National Wildlife Refuge in Tallulah, Louisiana, or the White River National Wildlife Refuge in southeast Arkansas.

## How You Can Help

There are a number of things that you can do to help with conservation of the Louisiana Black Bear in eastern Texas. First, if you own bottomland property in eastern Texas, you can conserve existing mature bottomland hardwood forest, and restore retired bottomland agricultural lands back to bottomland hardwood forests. For managed bottomland hardwood forests, creative management strategies that maintain multiple age classes of preferred hard and soft mast species through time will assure long-term habitat needs for Louisiana black bear. For adjacent slope forests, and upland forests, it is critical to leave significant streamside management zones (SMZs). These SMZs, in addition to providing food and cover for bears, can be utilized to provide corridors or linkages between areas of suitable habitats. It is of critical importance in these bottomland hardwood forests, and within these SMZs to conserve mature hardwood trees with significant hollows that could be utilized by black bears as den trees.

In addition to creation of black bear habitats through management of bottomland hardwood forests, it is important to minimize dumping of human garbage and foods near rural homes, and/or hunting camps. Bears are attracted to these areas, and can become acclimated to locating them for easy sustenance. This creates a situation that will lead bears into situations where they may actually be killed out of fear by some homeowners. In addition to problems with dumping, well-intentioned citizens, actually interested in bears near their homes, can create the same problem by actively feeding bears. The thing that must be avoided is training the bear to associate man with food. The natural fear that a bear has of man must be maintained for the safety of both the bear and man.

In addition, you can become a member of the Black Bear Conservation Committee. You can become either a supportive, or active member, and become active in the conservation of this species throughout its range.

## For More Information Contact

Texas Parks and Wildlife Department
Wildlife Diversity Program
4200 Smith School Road
Austin, Texas 78744
(512) 912-7011 or (800) 792-1112
www.tpwd.state.tx.us
or
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Ecological Services Field Office
10711 Burnet Road, Suite 200
Austin, Texas 78758
(512) 490-0057
www.usfws.gov
or
Black Bear Conservation Committee
P.O. Box 4125
Baton Rouge, Louisiana 70821
(504) 338-1040
www.bbcc.org

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