

# Living with Black Bears in Alabama

By David Rainer, Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources



*“The black bear represents an important wildlife resource in Alabama woodlands. If you have an unexpected encounter with a black bear, do not panic,” say wildlife professionals. “Consider yourself lucky because you are one of the few people in Alabama to have experienced such a sight.”*

Wildlife and law enforcement officials looked for the bear in the Oxford area but never saw it again. Harms stated that is because a young male may travel a great distance before he finds suitable habitat to call home; he will keep pushing out until he comes to a place that meets his needs. “We had one that went from Georgia, across Alabama, and into Mississippi,” he said. “We had sightings of that bear all the way across, so there’s no telling where the bear that was seen in Oxford will end up.”

When the public spots a black bear near a residential area, Harms says to stay out of its way and report the sighting to the district WFF office. “Just give the bear its space and let it move through,” he said. “I know people want to take pictures, but keep your distance . . . let it be a bear and let it move on. Usually in those situations, by the next day, you’re not going to see it again.”

Other areas of Alabama have bears, but there are only a few breeding populations. The main concentration of Alabama’s black bears is in Mobile, Baldwin, and Washington counties and the Mobile-Tensaw Delta. A small group living in Conecuh National Forest, like those bears in southwest Alabama, are the Florida subspecies (*Ursus americanus floridanus*). Migrating from north Georgia, the bears in the Little River area in northeast

**D**on’t be surprised if a sighting that occurred recently in Oxford, Alabama, becomes more commonplace. A young, male black bear strolled through several neighborhoods in the area, creating somewhat of a stir.

According to Thomas Harms, Wildlife Biologist and Large Carnivore Coordinator with the Alabama Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries (WFF), the state’s black bear population is expanding and sightings will likely increase. That is not a cause for alarm, as long as you give the bear plenty of room. “It’s not uncommon to see one this time of year,” Harms said. “Usually when you see one in a populated area, it’s a young male that has been pushed out by his mother and is looking for a new home range.”

Alabama are a different subspecies (*Ursus americanus americanus*). Mature female bears average about 200 pounds. Males average about 300 pounds.

Alabama is not alone in an expanding population of black bears; the trend extends to the entire Southeast. The WFF is currently working with Auburn University researchers and other state and federal agencies to collect data on the state's black bear population and movements.

There are eight collared bears in south Alabama and two in north Alabama, with plans to trap and collar several more this summer. The collars are designed to stay on the bears for 14-15 months and then drop off. Biologists then recover the collars to download a full year of data.

"We're still working on the data to try to determine the number," Harms commented. "We're processing hair samples and we have a few bears collared. We're probably talking around 450 bears statewide. It could be a little more or a little less. We don't count transient males passing through; they're not part of the population. Once they mature and find a breeding female, they become part of an actual breeding population."

From the data on hand, it appears female bears in south Alabama have a home range of 7 to 8 square miles. In north Alabama, the female home range is about 12 square miles. "It's two completely different habitats," Harms stated. "Up north, it's more of a mountainous range and the bears have to cover more ground to find food. In south Alabama, just about everything grows year-round and the bears don't have to travel as far to forage. Plus, there is a denser population in south Alabama, so that may have something to do with it."

As for males, they have a home range of about 20 square miles. "It's just like a buck covers more area," continued Harms, "trying to cover more than one female at one time. And the males do protect their home range, their breeding area. They prefer not to fight, but they will. Most of the time the smaller bear will just run off."

In Alabama, black bear is a game species but there is no open season. "There's a pretty good fine for killing one," says Harms, "so whatever you do, don't shoot one."

Because they haven't been hunted in decades, the population is slowly expanding. "Being a predatory species, their growth is a lot slower than deer or anything like that," he continued, "so it's going to take them a lot longer to rebound. We're seeing sows with three cubs pretty often and sometimes even four, which means they're eating better and reproducing more. If you're seeing multiple young, it usually means that the population is in good health."



Photos courtesy of USFWS

Outreach and educational meetings for the public such as those recently held by the WFF in southwest Alabama will eventually be hosted on a statewide basis according to Harms. "We talk about bear reproduction, how to understand the bears and how to live with them," he continued. "What most people know about bears is what they see in stories or on TV or in the movies, and they can draw the wrong conclusions. We want to give them the latest information on black bears and what to expect when they live in areas with bear populations."

Conservation groups such as the Alabama Black Bear Alliance (ABBA) are also working to determine the abundance, ecology, and conservation strategies necessary to protect and maintain black bears in the state. ABBA is a non-profit conservation consortium formed in 1997 by conservation organizations including the Alabama Wildlife Federation, the Alabama chapter of the Nature Conservancy, and state and federal agencies, the forest industry, agricultural organizations, the academic community, and a broad coalition of landowners.

The public is encouraged to report black bear sightings online at [www.alabamablackbearalliance.org](http://www.alabamablackbearalliance.org) or <https://game.dcnr.alabama.gov/BlackBear>. They can also contact any of the WFF district offices (visit [www.outdooralabama.com/wildlife-section](http://www.outdooralabama.com/wildlife-section) for information) or email Thomas Harms at [Thomas.Harms@dcnr.alabama.gov](mailto:Thomas.Harms@dcnr.alabama.gov). "If they have photos, we would like to see them," Harms said. "If they give permission, we want to post them on Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries' Facebook page."

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*Alabama's black bear population appears to be on the rise. A small population has existed in the southwest corner of the state, but bears migrating from Georgia have now established a viable population in northeast Alabama as well. Most recently, numerous sightings of a black bear were reported in both Oxford and Tallapoosa County, where the bear was observed eating from trash cans.*

## Black Bears

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Black bears are typically secretive, timid animals that avoid human interaction. What should you do if you are lucky enough to encounter/observe a black bear? The WFF offers these suggestions:

- Do not be frightened.
- Do not approach the animal.
- Do not run from the bear; back away slowly.
- Stand tall and upright and make loud noises.
- Avoid direct eye contact with the bear.
- Make sure the bear has an unobstructed direction to escape.
- Never purposely feed a bear.
- Never approach a bear with cubs; this will provoke an attack.

### How well do you know your new neighbors?

- Black bears are the most widespread bear species in the world and were formerly found throughout Alabama. Today, these 'old neighbors' are moving back into many of Alabama's neighborhoods. There are known populations in southwest and northeast Alabama, although newcomers have been spotted passing through many other parts of the state.
- Male black bears (boars) can range in size from 150-350 pounds, and females (sows) range from 100-250 pounds, with body lengths from 3 to 6 feet.
- Black bear coats range in color from the more common black to bluish-black and cinnamon. Some have a brown muzzle and an occasional white blaze on the chest.
- The average life span of a black bear is 18 years of age in the wild.
- Both boars and sows reach reproductive age at 3-5 years and are fully mature by age 5. Mating generally occurs in

the summer months, and cubs are born in winter dens in January and February. Litter size can range from one to five, with twins being most common.

- In the Deep South, black bears do not tend to hibernate like those living in areas with extreme winter temperatures. Because food is more available and winters are not as harsh, the only black bears that may hibernate in the South are pregnant sows or those with young cubs.
- Black bear habitat preference is primarily dependent on diversity and accessibility of food. They can be found in mountainous, swampy, and bottomland hardwood habitats. In general, they prefer thick timber for shelter over more open habitats. Prime habitat consists of escape cover, dispersal corridors, abundant and diverse natural food sources, water, and sufficient denning sites.
- Moving more at dusk and dawn, black bears may also be seen during the day. Typically, they utilize some sort of drainage corridor, be it a creek or river bottom, ditch or drain. However, with loss of habitat in many areas of the state due to residential and commercial development, bears will utilize a wide array of habitats to move from place to place, which also increases their visibility to the public. They mark territory by rubbing their bodies on and clawing trees to leave scents and claw marks.
- The black bear's diet consists of approximately 85 percent plant material. During the spring and summer, they feed on new plant growth, fruits, and berries. They feed primarily on hard mast such as acorns and nuts in the fall and early winter. Black bears also will eat insects, fish, and meat, including small mammals and carrion. Occasionally, they will take advantage of agricultural crops such as corn, wheat, and sugarcane, and have been known to damage beehives in their quest for honey.

- Most problems with bears stem from their quest for food, particularly at times when natural food sources are in short supply. Their acute sense of smell sometimes directs them to areas that increase their likelihood for conflict with humans. Household garbage can be very attractive to bears and an effort should be made to either secure it to a degree where they cannot gain access to it, or keep it inside until the day of pickup if bears have been reported in your area. Only feed outdoor pets the amount of food that they will consume in a short time period leaving no residual items that might attract a bear. The feeding of birds and other wildlife also increases the possibility of attracting unwanted attention to your property, as wildlife feeders provide easy pickings for hungry young bears.
- Feeding bears is a bad idea that can lead to dangerous consequences. It attracts bears to places they normally would not go, possibly causing them to lose their natural wariness of humans, which is their most important survival mechanism. Bears that continue to get an easy meal near your home may keep coming back. If conditioned to associate a residence or people as a food source, they may then approach other people for food. While this may seem ‘cute’ at first, as the bears become bolder serious problems can occur. Bears are wild animals and therefore their behavior is unpredictable.
- Although black bears are not typically aggressive, that does not make them oversized teddy bears. Unprovoked attacks on humans are uncommon throughout the black bear’s range and are extremely rare. When confronted by people or domestic dogs, they frequently display a “flight response” and run away. However, when pressed or threatened, they can and will turn, pursue, and be a potential threat. Most attacks occur when bears are surprised, cornered, or otherwise threatened. Interactions between bears and humans should be avoided because all bears are potentially dangerous and could inflict serious injury. Also, sows with cubs are just like any other mother – they can be very defensive and will aggressively protect their young if they perceive a threat.
- As a protected species in Alabama, it is illegal to shoot or harm a black bear. Shooting at one is a Class A misdemeanor, which carries a potential minimum fine of \$2,000. Other penalties for firing at a black bear include the potential loss of hunting and fishing license privileges for three years and possible jail time. *In 2015, a Heflin man received a one-year suspended jail sentence and nine months supervised probation, in addition to being fined \$2,000 plus court costs for shooting at a black bear, although the bear was unharmed.*
- As we learn more about our wild neighbors, we can present them with the same Southern hospitality we try to provide our human neighbors. The black bear is one of those neighbors who loves its space and privacy. We should respect them. For more information about black bears in Alabama, visit [www.outdooralabama.com](http://www.outdooralabama.com) and [www.alabamablackbearalliance.org](http://www.alabamablackbearalliance.org). 🐾

*“All bears sighted this year have been behaving normally and exhibiting a natural fear of humans,” said Steve Bryant, District 2 Supervising Wildlife Biologist for the Alabama Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries. “So far there are no reports of bears presenting any problems or threats to anyone who has encountered them, or causing any property damage.”*

