



Outdoor Oklahoma

JULY/AUGUST 2009 - ONLY \$10 A YEAR

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2009 Readers' Photo Showcase

New Wildlife Department Director

Black Bears



in Oklahoma





100 Years Ago...

Black bears once ranged across North America, including the entire area of what is now the state of Oklahoma. But by the early 1900s, sightings had become rare.

Black bears are sensitive to habitat loss, so as human encroachment persisted, black bear populations became patchy to non-existent in Oklahoma. Like other wildlife, black bear numbers declined drastically with the impacts of urban development, unregulated hunting, and habitat fragmentation.

But as with other conservation success stories, such as that of the whitetail deer and wild turkey, things eventually started turning around for what seemed like an inevitable downfall for the black bear in Oklahoma.

Today...

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission successfully reintroduced black bears into the Ouachita and Ozark Mountains of Arkansas. That initial relocation of about 250 bears from northern Minnesota and Manitoba, Canada, turned into thousands of bears in the mountains of Arkansas, which then expanded into southwest Missouri and eastern Oklahoma. Viewed as one of the most successful reintroductions of large carnivores in the world, this reestablishment of black bears led to a renewed black bear season in Arkansas in 1980.

Twenty-nine years later, in 2009, the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation will offer its first black bear hunt, making Oklahoma the 29th state to host a black bear season.

Hunters' Dollars at Work

As the historic first black bear hunting season approaches, hunters can pat themselves on the back because their efforts have helped bring the black bear back to Oklahoma. Through their purchase of hunting licenses as well as the purchase of certain hunting equipment, funds have continued to flow into wildlife conservation efforts in Oklahoma through the Wildlife Restoration Program. Hunting equipment carries a federal tax that is collected from the manufacturer, and such taxes are then distributed to state wildlife agencies by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The program functions as a "user pay, user benefit" program in that the number of hunting licenses issued in Oklahoma annually helps determine the final amount of the program's funding. Because of the Wildlife Restoration Program, Oklahoma's funds today represent millions of additional conservation dollars invested in our state by licensed hunters.

Because of efforts to enhance and restore habitat used by species such as deer, wild turkey and furbearers over the years, the black bear has benefited. Sportsmen's dollars have gone a long way in making that happen through research projects, habitat restoration, law enforcement efforts and long-term cooperative relationships between the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation and landowners.



TES RANDLE JOLLY

Black bears in Oklahoma represent a conservation success story and provide Oklahomans with potentially important economic and recreational opportunities. Additionally, the black bear serves as an indicator species to biologists seeking information about quality habitat. Oklahoma will hold its first black bear season in 2009, making it the 29th state to hold a hunting season for black bears.



ALEX COVARRUBIAS



Black bears may be spotted in small openings within woodlands, where they can find a variety of food.



Natural History of the Black Bear

The American black bear is the smallest of the three North American bear species, behind larger grizzly and polar bears. The black bear is the only bear species still found in Oklahoma. Although black is the dominant color of black bears in the eastern U.S., brown or “cinnamon” colored bears are common in the west.

The black bear has a keen sense of hearing and smell to make up for relatively poor eyesight. They walk on the soles of their feet, which makes them have a lumbering appearance when they walk. But don't be fooled by their ambling stride. When needed, adult black bears can reach speeds of 35 mph.

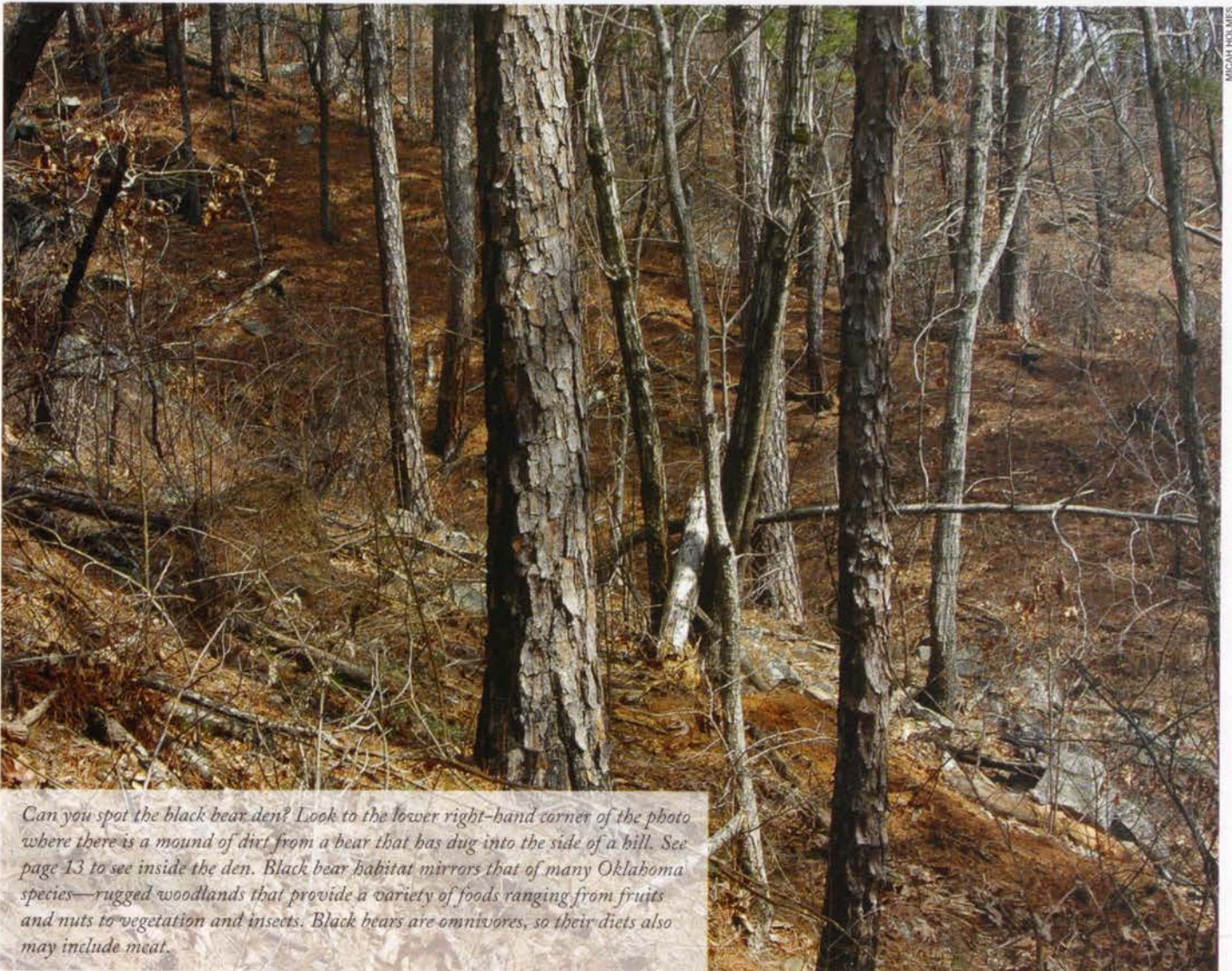
Adult females range from 100 to 300 pounds, with the majority of adult males weighing up to 400 pounds. However, there are records of male black bears tipping the scales at over 700 pounds. Black bears can live up to 25 years.

Black bears are omnivorous, meaning they eat vegetation, nuts, berries, insects, and some meat. Meat and less succulent greens are eaten when preferred foods are scarce.

Females usually reach sexual maturity at two years old, and have cubs every other year after maturing. A typical pregnancy lasts about 220 days. Males reach sexual maturity at three to four years old but continue to grow until they are 10 to 12 years old, at which point they are large enough to dominate younger bears without fighting.

Black bears prefer large forests with a variety of trees that produce fruits and nuts. Openings within forests can provide a variety of food for bears, such as blackberries. Lowlands and wetlands provide tender and succulent vegetation. Streams and woodland pools provide water for drinking and cooling.

In most of the states and provinces occupied by black bears, they are treated as game animals, subject to regulated hunting. An estimated 30,000 bears are harvested annually in North America. The black bear population in North America numbers almost one million, with estimates as high as 465,000 in the United States and 476,000 in Canada.



Can you spot the black bear den? Look to the lower right-hand corner of the photo where there is a mound of dirt from a bear that has dug into the side of a hill. See page 13 to see inside the den. Black bear habitat mirrors that of many Oklahoma species—rugged woodlands that provide a variety of foods ranging from fruits and nuts to vegetation and insects. Black bears are omnivores, so their diets also may include meat.



A Year in the Life of a Black Bear by David Rempe

Spring

Black bears begin to leave their wintering dens around April. Adult males leave their dens first, while females with cubs emerge later. All bears lose weight at this time of year because food is usually scarce. Adult males start to roam great distances — anywhere from five to 128 miles outside of their core areas. When the new growth of spring arrives, they begin to eat sprouting grass, emerging herbs, and young leaves. Cubs will usually taste what their mother eats, but swallow very little of it. They still rely on their mother's milk. Female bears that are nursing young cubs continue to lose weight while other bears slowly begin to gain weight.

Summer

As the growing season progresses, green plants mature and toughen, making most of them inedible for bears. Ant pupae become abundant and bears add them to their diet, although the main sources of food are wild fruits, berries and nuts. During early summer, cubs begin eating solid food, especially ant pupae from logs their mother opens for them. Cubs stop

nursing altogether sometime in late summer. Mating season begins during the late spring or early summer, and males roam widely to find females without cubs.

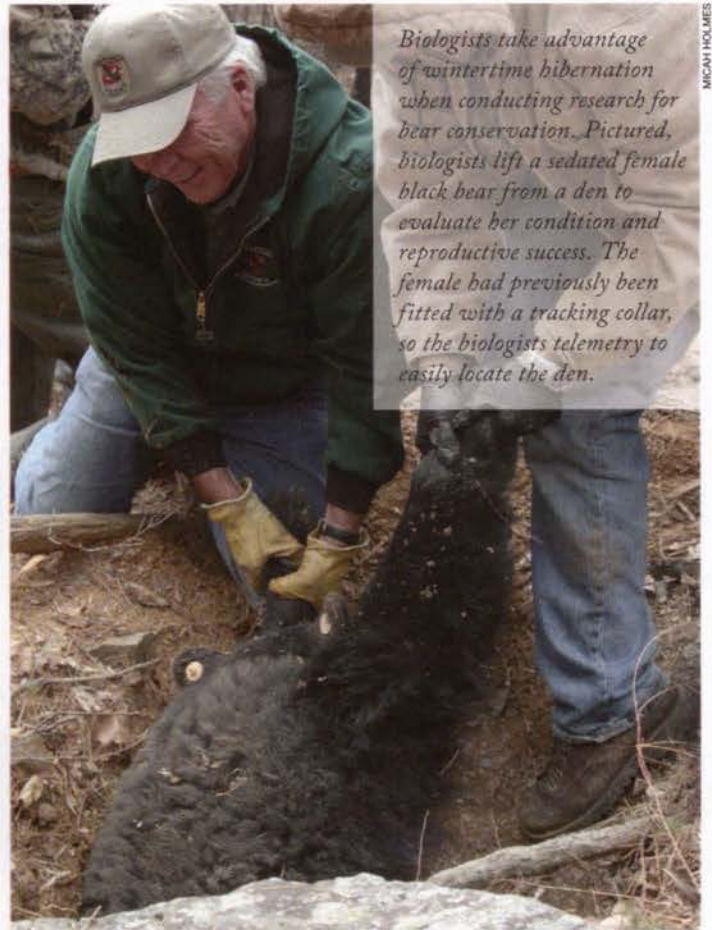
Fall

In September, acorns start to ripen and become the main source of food, when available. Where acorns are abundant, bears feed and fatten on them in preparation for hibernation. Bears in Oklahoma start searching for dens in early October, and most have denned by late December. They spend the winter in dens located in rock crevices, in underground burrows, under tree roots, in hollow trees, in brush piles, or simply on open-ground beds. Cubs born last winter will share their mother's den. As the cold of November starts to set in, hibernation deepens. But unlike "true hibernators," body temperature does not decrease drastically. This enables bears to rouse quickly from their winter sleep and occasionally make short ventures from dens on warm winter days. November is also when eggs that were fertilized in the late spring or early summer implant in the uterus and begin to develop.

Winter

Hibernation continues from December through March. Cubs are usually born in January. The female bear licks them clean, keeps them warm and allows them to nurse. The number of cubs in a litter is usually two in the western United States and three in the eastern United States. Cubs usually stay with their mother for around 17 months. Female bears will then force their yearlings to stop traveling with them in preparation for the next mating season.

—David Rempe is a game warden for the Wildlife Department stationed in Harper County.

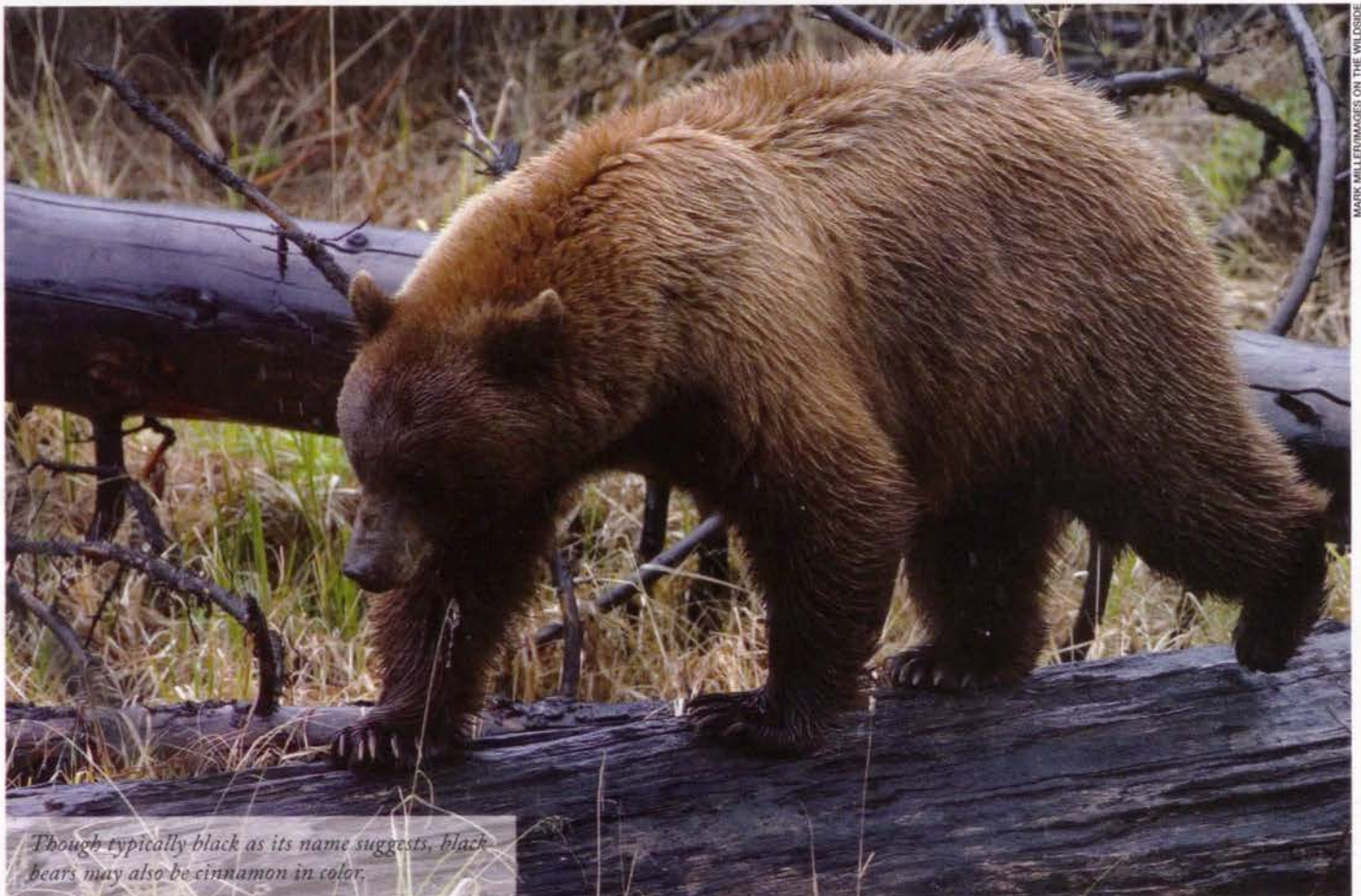


Biologists take advantage of wintertime hibernation when conducting research for bear conservation. Pictured, biologists lift a sedated female black bear from a den to evaluate her condition and reproductive success. The female had previously been fitted with a tracking collar, so the biologists telemetry to easily locate the den.

MICAH HOLMES

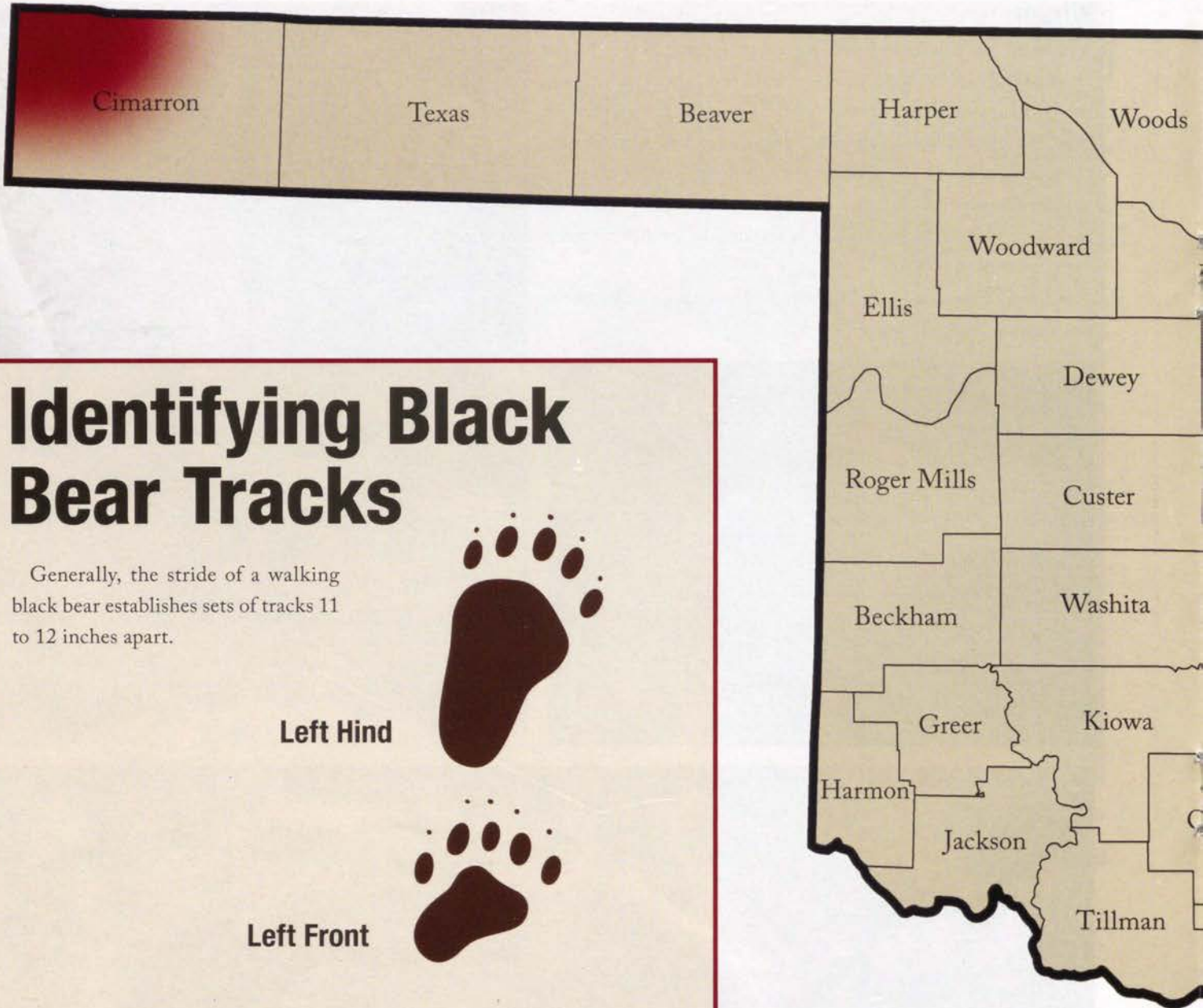


MICAH HOLMES



Though typically black as its name suggests, black bears may also be cinnamon in color.

MARK MILLER/IMAGES ON THE WILDSIDE



Identifying Black Bear Tracks

Generally, the stride of a walking black bear establishes sets of tracks 11 to 12 inches apart.

Left Hind



Left Front



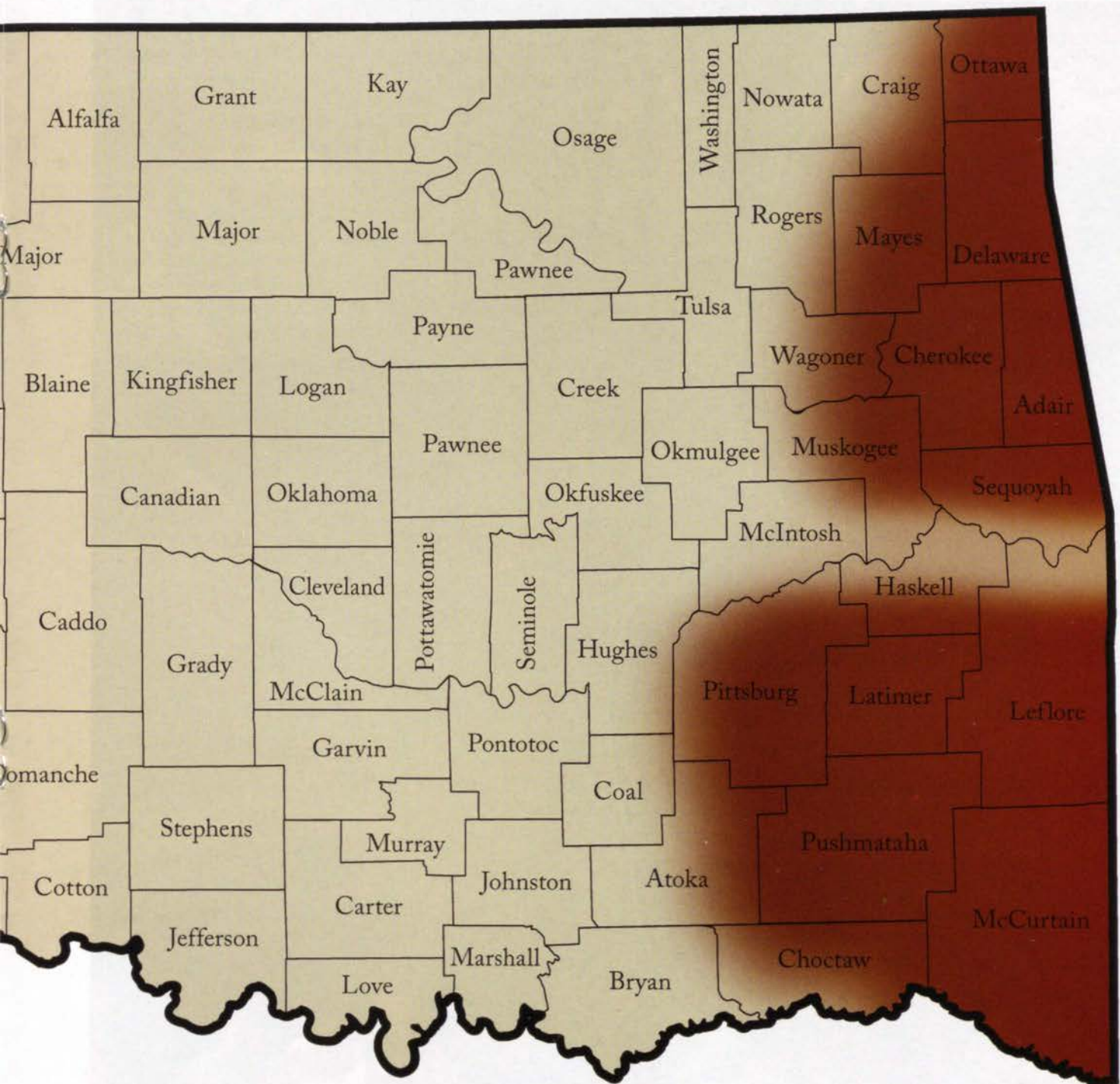
Right Hind



Right Front



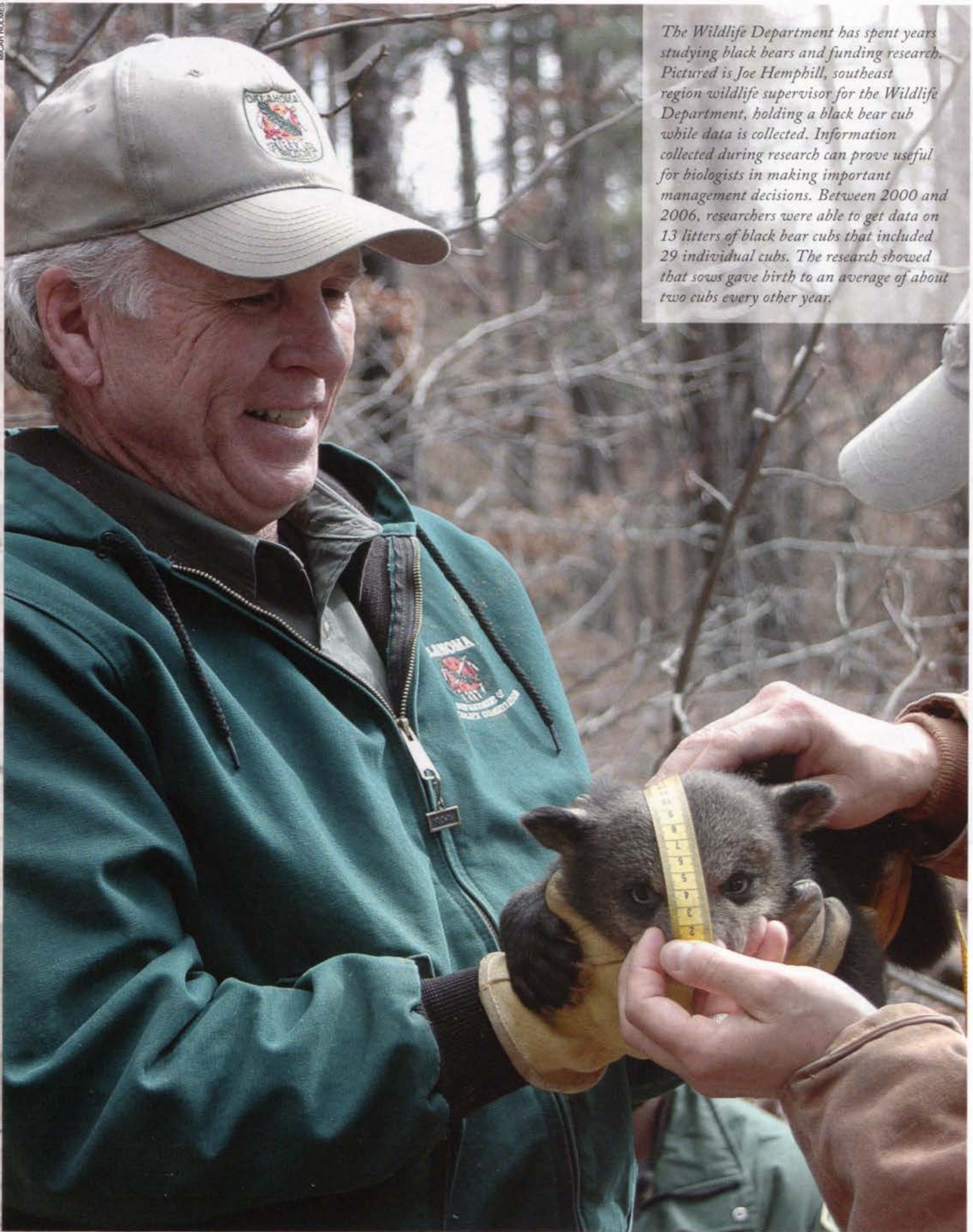
 **Core Habitat Range**



Typical Black Bear Range in Oklahoma

The largest population of black bears is found in southeast Oklahoma. However, they also can be found in parts of northeast Oklahoma and occasionally are spotted in portions of the far reaches of the Panhandle. This speaks not only to the black bear's ability to adapt to a variety of habitats, but also to Oklahoma's abundant and diverse wildlife habitat. Biologists view the pres-

ence black bears as an indicator of the quality of habitat an area provides, because oftentimes, if an area supports stable populations of black bears, then it is sufficient to also support a diversity of other wildlife as well. Oklahoma became the 29th state to establish a black bear season when it was approved by the Oklahoma Wildlife Commission and signed by the governor in April 2009.



The Wildlife Department has spent years studying black bears and funding research. Pictured is Joe Hemphill, southeast region wildlife supervisor for the Wildlife Department, holding a black bear cub while data is collected. Information collected during research can prove useful for biologists in making important management decisions. Between 2000 and 2006, researchers were able to get data on 13 litters of black bear cubs that included 29 individual cubs. The research showed that sows gave birth to an average of about two cubs every other year.

Financial support for this project was provided by the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act under Project W-155-R of the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation.



This female black bear was tracked with radio telemetry through the summer and fall, then sedated so biologists could collect data for research project that will help wildlife professionals better understand black bears. After the information was collected — which included such information as the female's reproductive success, weight and physical condition along with information about her cubs — the female and her cubs were placed back in her den to hibernate for the winter.

Research Brings Insight by Micah Holmes

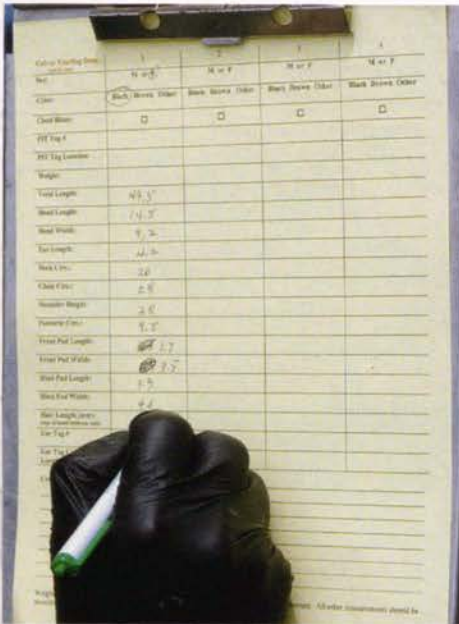
Research done by the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation and Oklahoma State University has given more insight into the ecology and population dynamics of black bears.

The Wildlife Department worked on a joint project with the Oklahoma Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit at Oklahoma State University to learn more about this unique and growing population of more than 450 bears. The project centered on the LeFlore County portions of the Ouachita National Forest and Honobia Creek Wildlife Management Area.

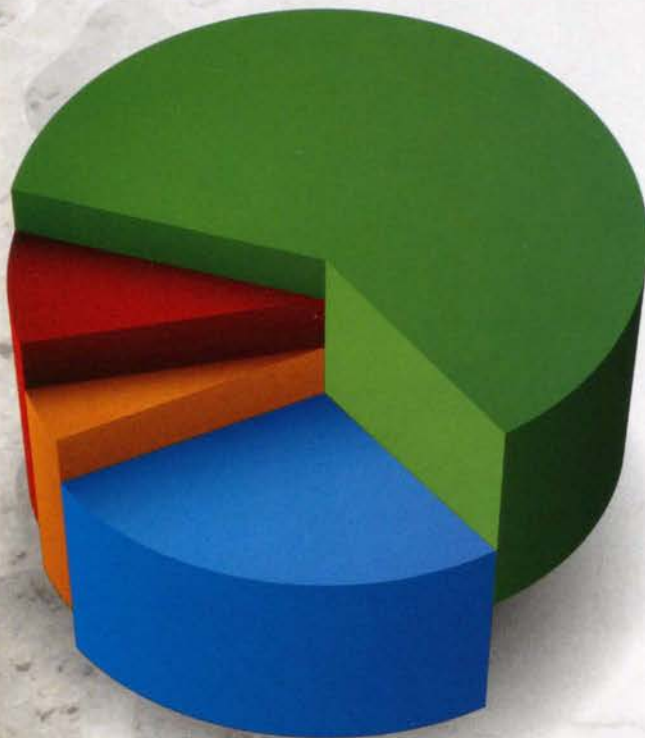
During the summers of 2000-2006, graduate students used radio telemetry and DNA samples to learn just how many bears were out there, how they used the landscape and how fast the population was growing.

The research teams captured 80 black bears and collected data such as age, weight, and blood samples on each animal. Radio-telemetry collars were placed on 25 females, or "sows." This allowed researchers to track the animals' movements, feeding patterns, and habitat preferences.

The collars also allowed researchers to track the female bears directly to their hibernation dens in the winter. By sedating the



Along with trapping and responding to nuisance bear calls over the years, biologists have been involved in extensive research, including collecting data from individual bears.



58% Strongly Support **31% Moderately Support** **5% Moderately Oppose** **7% Strongly Oppose**

If research indicated the bear population could support it, would you support or oppose a limited black bear hunting season? This question was asked as part of a research project that surveyed nearly 1,300 hunting license holders in 2006.

bears, researchers were able to learn about the reproductive success of the sows. During the study researchers were able to get data on 13 litters with a total of 29 cubs. The research showed that sows had an average of about two cubs every other year.

The research also showed that female black bears will cover an area of approximately eight square miles. Males will cover larger areas, especially if it is mating season or if the males are young bears, based on information from other research.

Biologists also obtained hair samples at bait stations. Using DNA analysis, they identified 161 different bears across LeFlore, Pushmataha and Latimer counties. The sex ratio of Oklahoma's bear population is split down the middle, about 50 percent males and 50 percent females. The average age of bears in Oklahoma is 3.7 years, a relatively young average age compared to other populations in other states. This means that the population is still growing. The oldest bear in the study was an 11-year-old female.

Not all of the Wildlife Department's data on black bears comes from sophisticated research projects. When a bear shows up one too many times at a bird feeder, trash can or campground, the Wildlife Department usually gets a call.

Since 1991, the Wildlife Department has responded to approximately 500 calls about nuisance bears, and about half the time a site visit is necessary to assess the situation. Many times the problem can be handled by changing human behavior such as securing garbage in bear-proof cans or hanging birdfeeders up higher in the trees. But on about 60 percent of the site visits, the bears have become too accustomed to a free handout from humans, and the biologists need to set up a live trap to catch the bear.

Wildlife Department personnel are successful in trapping bears about half of the time. When a bear is caught, biologists take it many miles away to a secluded location and release it. Only rarely — about five percent of the time — is the same bear caught again in a trap.

The Wildlife Department also tracks how many bears are killed by vehicles while crossing a road or highway. Although seeing a bear along the road is rare, a total of seven bears have been killed by vehicles in the last four years.

Officials with the Wildlife Department do not just research wildlife and fish populations, they also research people — or more specifically their attitudes and preferences toward hunting and fishing opportunities.

Each winter the Wildlife Department conducts a survey of

hunting license holders. Participants are asked about their hunting activities in the previous year and their opinions on issues facing the Wildlife Department. Sportsmen and women respond to a wide variety of questions each year ranging from how many squirrels they killed last year to how often they used wildlife management areas during the last year.

These annual surveys also present an opportunity for the Wildlife Department to gauge the interest and opinions about potential regulations changes that may be on the horizon. In 2006, the Wildlife Department asked nearly 1,300 hunters their opinions about a limited bear hunting season in the state — an impressive 89 percent said they would support such a season.

—*Micah Holmes is an information supervisor for the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation.*



A female black bear hibernates with her three cubs. Black bears are not "true hibernators" because their body temperatures do not drastically decrease, which allows black bears to quickly awaken and make occasional short journeys outside their dens. In addition to tracking bears with telemetry, biologists also use ear tags (right) to maintain bear tracking records.



Black bears can be elusive, and most Oklahomans can go their entire lives without seeing one in the wild. Though it can be rewarding to spot one, precautions should be taken to avoid too close of an encounter. Most bears will avoid people and will even leave an area if it suspects humans are nearby, but bears that have become accustomed to people or who associate people with food are better off avoided.

Are You Bear Aware?

The black bear's presence in Oklahoma reminds us that our state provides some of the most diverse habitat in the country, and the fact that people have a chance to spot a black bear in the wild adds to the reasons why Oklahoma really is one of the best places to live and be an outdoorsman.

The places in Oklahoma where black bears are most common also happen to be some of the best places for outdoor recreation in the state, especially for activities such as hunting, fishing, hiking and camping. And along with that comes the potential for close encounters with black bears and other wildlife. People who visit or live in areas with black bears should be aware of how to avoid black bear encounters, and the following section offers some helpful tips to remember.

Avoid Attracting Bears in the First Place

Black bears can be troublesome around camps or cabins if food is left available, and have at times been known to damage agricultural crops or disturb livestock. Though black bears pose little threat to humans most of the time, humans can increase the chance of problems by leaving food available and feeding bears on purpose. If you avoid attracting a bear in the first place, it will likely avoid you.

Read the Signs

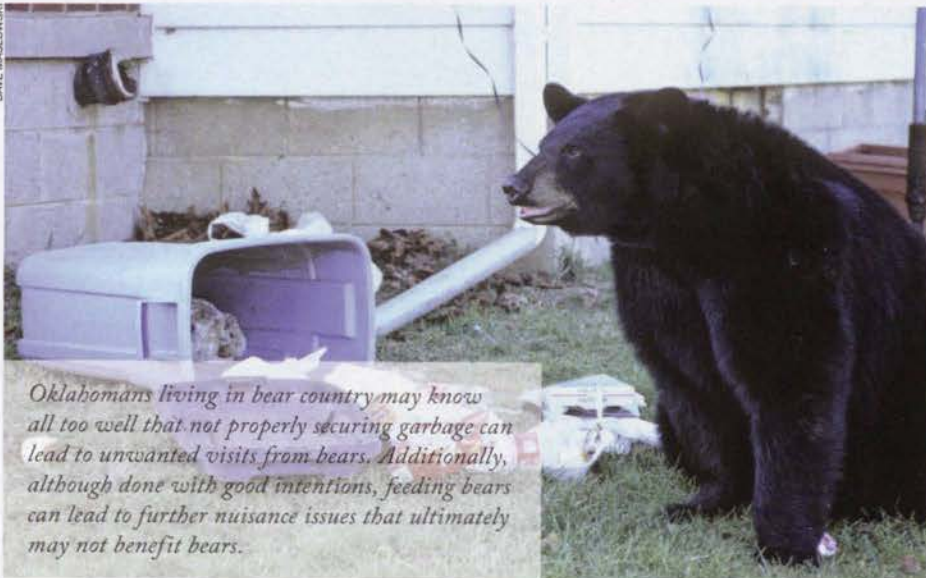
Perhaps the most obvious way to be "bear aware" while enjoying the outdoors is to simply watch for them. While hunting or hiking, keep an eye out for bear sign. These include fresh scat, claw marks, diggings, and logs or stumps that have been torn apart. If you see a bear, enjoy the experience, but keep your distance.

Recreation in Bear Country

Outdoor activities like camping usually means having a good time in the outdoors with family and friends. But that also means good food, garbage accumulation and other bear attractants. You can do a few small things to "bear-proof" your camp, which not only better protects your stuff, but also helps deter bears. Biologists say once a bear becomes comfortable



This Oklahoma black bear's image was captured on a wild game trail camera after it had apparently knocked over a wildlife feeder to gain access to its contents.



Oklahomans living in bear country may know all too well that not properly securing garbage can lead to unwanted visits from bears. Additionally, although done with good intentions, feeding bears can lead to further nuisance issues that ultimately may not benefit bears.

with visiting campsites, homes, yards or other areas frequented by humans in order to find food, it's more likely to become a "nuisance" bear for other campers as well as for landowners.

Remember these tips around your campsite.

- Always keep a clean camp, and try to use designated camping areas when possible.
- When camping in areas not designated as campsites, avoid setting up camp close to possible food sources for bears.
- Keep your sleeping area, tent, and sleeping bag free of food or odors. Avoid sleeping in clothes worn while cooking or while handling fish and game.
- Keep food picked up when not in use. Store food in bear-resistant storage units or a hard-shelled vehicle or car trunk, and use bear-resistant trash containers. If you do not have these types of containers available, hang food at least 10 feet off the ground and four feet from any side supports.
- Keep all personal hygiene products out of the sleeping area because the odors can attract bears. It is also a good idea to pack dry, single-serving packages of food because they have fewer odors.

Living Near Black Bears

Bears feed on various shrubs, berries, fruit trees and other garden fruits and vegetables that many people in Oklahoma have growing around their homes. They also feed on honey produced in beehives.

These can be potential attractants for bears, as can unattended garbage and trash cans that have not been properly secured. Rummaging through trash cans can be one of the easiest ways for bears to find food. Additionally, dog food, bird feeders and other pet and animal feeds may attract bears.

Simple precautions such as spraying trash cans with disinfectant to remove odors, securing garbage kept outside and limiting pet and other livestock feed to portions they can consume at one time may reduce bear attractants around the home.

Also, do not feed bears. When nuts and berries are in short supply, some bears may be quick to overcome their cautious behaviors toward people, especially if they associate people with food. This can turn a small bear problem into a significant nuisance issue. Though it may be tempting to leave food out for bears, they are better served by being left alone. Usually a bear will leave an area once the food source is gone.

Farming or Ranching in Bear Country

Occasionally bears may kill lambs, pigs or calves. Although this is rare, such bears usually have to be captured and relocated. Bears causing significant damage to crops and fruit trees may also require relocation. If you are having problems with nuisance bears around your home or farm, the Wildlife Department may be able to help. Refer to the back of this pamphlet for contact information.



When managed properly, black bears can and do thrive in close proximity to humans. The key to achieving a successful balance is sound management and responsibility on the part of humans living in bear country to ensure the safety of their property. The Wildlife Department responds to numerous nuisance bear calls each year.

Have You Seen a Bear?

Any Oklahoman who has seen a bear could tell you it is a rewarding experience. For those who haven't, there is still value in simply knowing they are here, thriving in wild places within our own state. It is remarkable that a few rugged and remote areas still exist within the state that are capable of supporting them. Though for a time black bear numbers had greatly declined, Oklahomans can again say black bears are an integral part of the state's wildlife resources.

If you are experiencing problems with nuisance bears on your property, the Wildlife Department may be able to help. Please record the date and location of the sighting and contact one of the Wildlife Department professionals listed below.



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Wildlife Biologist
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For more information about the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation, log on to wildlifedepartment.com.