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Black Bears on the Way Back

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At a club in Red River County, deer hunters can't figure out what keeps tearing down their feeders and eating all of the corn.

Deep in the Big Thicket, a Park Service biologist finds downed logs torn apart in a search for insect larvae. Near Beaumont, motorists on Interstate 10 stop to watch a large, black shape on nearby railroad tracks.

All of these stories, along with others within the past few years, provide evidence for what biologists have been expecting for a long time — black bears are returning to the East Texas Pineywoods. Although there is little evidence of a stable, breeding population, sightings in the region have been increasing steadily over the last 15 years.

While many Texans are rightfully excited to see the return of this East Texas native, others are concerned about interactions with humans. Through education programs and research, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) and the East Texas Black Bear Task Force are working to track the return of the bear, to identify and promote good habitat conditions, and to mitigate any negative effects these animals may have.

The black bear (*Ursus americanus americanus*) was an abundant and vital part of the native fauna when the region was first settled by Europeans. Several accounts from that time document successful bear hunters and the many useful products (meat, fat, hides) obtained from bears. However, due to relentless hunting and land-use changes, bears disappeared from much of their native range by the middle of the twentieth century. The last bear in East Texas was believed to have been killed in the Big Thicket area in the late 1950s. After that, they were essentially absent from Texas until the arrival of bears, probably from Mexico, in the Big Bend region in the 1980s. Bears have since established a stable or expanding breeding population in that region. In East Texas, the process has taken longer.



Black bears are slowly returning to historic eastern Texas range. Some landowners and outdoorsmen are excited to see its return; some remain concerned with bruin/human conflicts.

Much of the Pineywoods area of southeast Texas, along with all of Louisiana, southwestern Mississippi, and the most southern counties in Arkansas, is within the historic range of a subspecies of the black bear, the Louisiana black bear (*Ursus americanus luteolus*). Due to severe reductions in its population and extensive loss of appropriate bottomland hardwood habitat, the Louisiana black bear was declared threatened by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service in 1992. Because of this listing and the difficulty in distinguishing subspecies in the field, **harming or killing any black bear in eastern Texas is considered a violation of federal law. There is no open season for bears in Texas, and state law protects them throughout the state.**

Following its listing, and due to the extensive efforts of government agencies and many private individuals and organizations, thousands of acres of bottomland habitat have been restored in the Mississippi and Atchafalaya Basins in Louisiana. Louisiana black bear populations are on the increase in their core area in Louisiana and bears have begun expanding to occupy new habitats. Current estimates

put the population at between 500 and 700 individuals. Successful restocking programs and natural recovery have resulted in a healthy and expanding population of some 3,000 bears in Arkansas with natural spillover into adjacent Oklahoma. Stable populations in Oklahoma are within 50 miles of the Texas border, and neither that distance nor the Red River is much of a barrier to black bears. Bears from Oklahoma and Arkansas are American black bears (*Ursus americanus americanus*) and thus not federally protected; however, they are still protected in Texas.

Despite public interest and anecdotal evidence that black bears were returning to East Texas, little was known until recently about black bear populations or their habitats in East Texas. For years, TPWD has documented and tracked bear sightings throughout the state. In the mid-1990s, the agency evaluated four areas of contiguous forested habitat (Big Thicket National Preserve, Sulphur River/White Oak Creek basin, middle Neches River, and lower Neches River) in the region for their suitability for black bears. All four areas scored as suitable bear habitat.

To gain more detailed habitat information and to provide information about current populations, TPWD and Stephen F. Austin State University initiated a research project in 2006 to study black bears in the region. Concentrating on three river basins in northeast Texas (Red, Sulphur, and Cypress) where recent sightings were most abundant, SFASU graduate student Tim Siegmund constructed and monitored 141 hair snare sampling stations during the summer of 2007. Hair snares are a standard way to survey black bears; they consist of a double strand of barbed wire strung around a bait station of sardines and raspberry extract. Hair from the snares is sent for genetic analysis to determine the species of animal and its gender, and to provide a unique identity for any black bears. With the 141 stations, Tim surveyed approximately 95,000 acres of forested habitat over the summer.

In these same 95,000 acres, Tim also established 461 vegetation measurement plots to quantify characteristics important for black bears such as berry and fruit production, acorn production, cover density, den sites, and distance to roads or other human activity. These measurements allow us to determine each area's suitability score as black bear habitat and to identify factors that may limit suitability for bears.

Our data so far suggest that black bears are present but sparsely distributed in northeastern Texas. We sent 21 hair samples for genetic analysis; however, only one was identified as a black bear — a male. Other species included feral hogs (no surprise there!), raccoons, striped skunk, and domestic dogs. Data on habitat suitability indicate that the forests of the Sulphur, Red, and Cypress basins could support a small and possibly stable future black bear population. East Texas forests score high for summer food (berries and fruit) availability, cover, and fall food (acorns and other nuts). Interestingly, the most important limiting factor was too many roads, despite some of the areas being among the largest contiguous forest blocks left in the state. A relatively small number of large, mature trees also limits den site availability in many areas but should not be a limiting factor since dense shrub cover and thickets exist for bears to nest on the ground.

This research project continued over the summer months in 2008, with an addi-



tional 193 hair snares set and 120,000 acres surveyed in the same three river basins. Genetic tests have not been performed yet, but we hope to gain additional information. Furthermore, a partnership between TPWD, SFASU, and the Black Bear Conservation Committee (BBCC) will allow researchers to extend the habitat and population surveys to the southeastern portion of the state over the next three years. This area was the last holdout for native bears in the state, and we are excited to see what may be present.

The black bear is a magnificent animal

that is an important part of the history, culture, and ecology of East Texas — and it appears to be slowly returning on its own to the area whether we want it to or not. For those interested in black bears or black bear conservation, the BBCC is a nonprofit organization that has excellent educational and informative materials available at their website (www.bbcc.org). The TPWD also has a “Bear Safety in Mind” brochure available on their website (www.tpwd.state.tx.us) or by calling your regional office (for East Texas, the Tyler office at (903) 566-1626 ext 221). 🐻

Important reminders for landowners and outdoorsmen in East Texas:

- **Black bears are protected by state and federal law.** Don't shoot one unless your life is threatened and you have proof!
- **Black bears can look like feral hogs**, especially in low-light conditions. Hunters in areas where bears may be present should be sure of their targets.
- Although black bears are generally not aggressive, they are large, powerful animals. Don't approach one and avoid running away, as this can trigger a chase instinct. Remain calm, and try to warn it off with loud noises.
- Bear sighting information is critical to monitoring bear activity in the state! If you have an encounter, please contact TPWD at (800) 792-1112 or the Tyler Regional Office at (903) 566-1626 ext 221.
- For landowners interested in black bear conservation, there are cost-share and landowner incentive programs to restore bottomland hardwood habitat on private lands. Interested landowners should contact TPWD or the BBCC.