

Photo courtesy of Louis Harveson, Borderlands Research Institute for Natural Resource Management, Sul Ross State University-Alpine



BLACK BEAR RECOVERY IN TEXAS





Article by **Henry Chappell**

Photos by Wyman Meinzer

“Thousands of wild bears lived

in the Big Thicket and got very fat every winter on the mast that grew on the oak trees in the forest. In the summer, they would come out of the Thicket to the piney woods and prey on the hogs that ranged there.... In the winter when bear were fat they made very fine meat, and my father used to go back in the Thicket to kill them and bring them home for food.”

Vinson Collins in *Tales from the Big Thicket*, Francis E. Abernathy, editor.

In the 1880s, Ab Carter, a pioneer stockman, ran hogs in the Pineywoods on the western edge of Tarkington Prairie, in Liberty County, Texas. Like his father, he considered killing bears as important as raising swine.

In 1883, Carter and his nearest neighbor each acquired a pack of excellent bear hounds. Over the next two years, they killed 182 black bears, mostly within a 10-mile radius of their farms. From 1886 to 1900, they were unable to kill more than 20 or so bears per year. Having thinned the bear population to the point that his hogs could fatten up unmolested in some 100 square miles of mast-rich woods, Carter, evidently unburdened by loyalty or gratitude, killed his hounds. In a 1904 interview with U.S. Biological Survey field biologists, he reported that he now had need for hog and wolf dogs only.

That same year, the great houndsman Ben Lilly walked out of Louisiana into the Big Thicket in search of a bear to serve as a U.S. Biological Survey specimen. He spent the better part of a year locating an acceptable bear. When he left the Big Thicket in 1906, Lilly estimated that only 15 bears remained.

As an overfed, under-worked vegetable gardener who isn't above acting on murderous feelings toward larcenous cottontails and raccoons or directing canine minions to do my dirty work, I'm not unsympathetic toward pioneers who resented having their smokehouses raided, beehives torn apart, and pigs and foals carried off and eaten.

Yet, we no longer live so close to the edge that a plundered garden or stolen milk cow could lead to real suffering. If our current prosperity extends from our ancestors' pragmatic and — let's be honest — rapacious exploitation of our natural heritage, then surely we can tolerate, restore, conserve, and bequeath the grandest symbols of that heritage.

BEAR FACTS

Historically, the American Black Bear (*Ursus americanus*) inhabited all 10 of Texas's ecological regions. The southeastern subspecies, the Louisiana black bear (*Ursus americanus luteolus*), lived throughout East Texas, including the Pineywoods, Coastal





Photo by Wendee Holtcamp

A DORMANT LOUISIANA BLACK BEAR spends time with her cubs in a temporary den constructed by researchers. Black bears don't truly hibernate. Rather, they fall into a torpor, characterized by lowered body temperature and slowed metabolism and heart rate.



Photo by Wendee Holtcamp

THIS IS A PAIR OF LOUISIANA BLACK BEAR CUBS. According to TPWD's Nathan Garner, Louisiana's rapidly expanding bear population will speed Texas's bear recovery.

Marshes and Prairies, and, perhaps, the Post Oak Savannah Region. Bears in the Trans-Pecos region of far West Texas were likely the subspecies *Ursus americanus eremicus*, the Mexican Black Bear, and *Ursus americanus amblyceps*, the New Mexican Black Bear. *Ursus americanus*, *americanus*, or Eastern Black Bear, probably occupied the rest of the state. Currently, taxonomists recognize 16 subspecies of *U. americanus*.

Like Native Americans, Texas pioneers, settlers, loggers and railroad workers hunted black bears for meat, hides, and fat, which they used for cooking oil. Stockmen considered bears a threat to their livelihoods and shot them at every opportunity.

By 1900, the last few bears in East Texas were hanging on in the lower reaches of the Big Thicket and the dense woods of Matagorda County. The last known native East Texas bear was shot in Polk County in the late 1950s. Several sightings were reported after the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries released 161 bears from Minnesota between 1964 and 1967. A bear shot near Silsbee in 1973 is believed to have wandered into Texas from Louisiana.

In the rugged, sparsely-populated desert mountains of West Texas, bears hung on a little longer. As late as 1902, U.S. Biological Survey chief Vernon Bailey described black bears as "fairly common" in the Guadalupe, Davis, and Chisos mountains. Over the next 50 years, the Trans-Pecos bear population gradually succumbed to unregulated sport hunting, predator control, habitat change, and other human-related pressures.

Restrictions on black bear harvests in Texas began in 1973, after bears were likely extinct in the state. That same year, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) received permission from the state legislature to maintain a list of Texas's endangered animals. Black bears were added to the list in 1987, after bear hunting was prohibited in 1983. Statewide, bears were down-listed to threatened status in 1996.

At the federal level, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listed the Louisiana black bear, and all other bears of the species *U. americanus* occurring within Texas, as threatened. Black bears in Texas are fully protected and cannot be killed or harmed.

Too little too late? What good are protections for bears that aren't around to enjoy them?

Given breathing room, wildlife is



remarkably resilient. Mexico has bears. New Mexico, Oklahoma, Arkansas and Louisiana have bears. Texas has habitat and protection in place, and it also has an increasingly educated public. Not surprisingly, bears are returning.

It began in the 1980s, when black bears in the mountains of Coahuila and Chihuahua, Mexico, began moving into unoccupied habitat in the Trans-Pecos. In 1984, a black bear was sighted in Big Bend National Park, the first sighting in some 50 years. By the mid-

incredible bear habitat.”

Recent sightings suggest that West Texas bears may be expanding east of the Pecos, into the western edge of the Hill Country.

Meanwhile, in East Texas, rumors of sightings persisted. In 1977, TPWD began documenting verifiable sightings of black bears in the Pineywoods and Post Oak Savannah regions and a portion of the Blackland Prairie.

There were eight sightings between 1977 and 1990; 13 sightings

✚ THE FOUR photos on this page were captured by game cameras. Even though the lower resolution images from these cameras are little fuzzy, the use of game cameras to capture these shots is of great value to the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and other agencies who work to estimate black bear populations and locations.



© Tom Archer

A GAME CAMERA PHOTO captured this East Texas bear helping himself to deer corn. As bears become more common, hunters will have to adjust. Keep in mind that in heavy cover or low light, a bear can look a lot like a feral hog.



© Tom Archer

LYING DOWN WITH A FULL BELLY or waiting for the feeder to drop corn, a young black bear takes it easy on a Pineywoods Deer lease.



© Tom Archer

A 2007 TRAIL CAMERA provided a good image of this male bear in East Texas. While biologists haven't yet documented a breeding population of black bears in East Texas, it's only a matter of time.



© Texas Parks and Wildlife Department

A BLACK BEAR RAIDS a deer feeder in East Texas in this photo. Hanging feeders at least eight feet high will help deter bears. Using soybeans instead of corn for bait helps too. Better yet, forget the feeder and plant a food plot.

1990s, a small breeding population roamed the Chisos Mountains. A tiny population has repatriated Guadalupe Mountains National Park, as well.

Bears have gradually expanded onto private property. Recently, two bears were spotted just South of Alpine. “The fact that landowners rarely report bear sightings out here is probably more a reflection of the huge ranch sizes and sparse human population than a lack of bears,” said Jonah Evans, a diversity biologist with TPWD.

Evans recently identified a bear track on Nature Conservancy property in the Davis Mountains. Although biologists still lack enough evidence to declare a breeding population in the Davis Mountains, it's just a matter of time. Evans said, “There's no question that the core population is expanding, and these mountains have

between 1991 and 2000. From 1999 through 2009, 57 bear sightings were documented by TPWD in 24 counties.

“Most of these are sub-adult males, 1-4 years old, looking for new territory,” said Nathan Garner, TPWD's Region III Director. “We rely heavily on game camera photos sent to us by hunters and landowners. In most of these, the bear is reared up taking corn from a deer feeder, so we can see his reproductive parts. These are young males who've left areas in Oklahoma, Arkansas, or Louisiana, where they were born and raised, and crossed into Texas in search of new home territories. A bear can easily move 20 miles in a single night. When we get verifiable photos of females and cubs, then we can say with some certainty that we have a bear population in East Texas. It's only a matter of time.”



BEAR ESSENTIALS

In northeast Texas, sightings have been concentrated in the Red River corridor, from Grayson County east to the border with Arkansas, and southward into the Sulphur River drainage, in Morris and Cass counties.

“We have a lot of excellent bear habitat in northeast Texas – 300,000 acres of gorgeous hardwood bottomland in the Sulphur River basin alone,” Garner said. “Then, there’s the Pecan Bayou watershed, the largest undammed watershed in the state, with tremendous, mature forested habitat for bears.”

Overall, East Texas has about 12 million acres of undeveloped forest land.

Although Arkansas currently claims the

Although black bears inhabit a wide variety of habitats – from East Texas bottomlands to desert mountains – their needs are consistent: food, cover, water, denning sites and relatively large, remote blocks of habitat.

Within East Texas’ forests, black bears inhabit uplands, bottomland and swamps. In general, ideal forest habitat is dominated by mature, mast-producing hardwoods and shrubs. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service studies suggest that hardwood river bottomland is the most valuable habitat.

The home range of a single adult male black bear may approach 80 square miles. Fragmentation caused by multilane highways seriously degrade bear habitat. Ac-



Photo by Grady Allen

BEAR TRACKS LIKE THIS are becoming more visible in parts of Texas. A bear can easily move 20 miles in a single night.

largest bear population of the three states bordering East Texas – some 3,000, according to estimates — Garner considers Oklahoma, with its current population of about 500 bears, especially important. “In my opinion, Oklahoma is probably the biggest supplier of free-roaming, naturally expanding black bears to East Texas right now, followed by Louisiana and Arkansas,” he said.

But Louisiana is approaching a tipping point. “Long term, Louisiana may be the big one,” Garner said. “They’ve gone from less than 200 bears 20 years ago to nearly 1,000 today, and there are so many females coming into that population that expansion in the East Texas is going to increase.”

According to the USFWS, bear habitat should be at least half a mile from a major road and a minimum of 2,500 acres in size.

Given the importance of bottomland habitat, and the fact that Texas has already lost 70 percent of its hardwood bottoms to reservoir construction and other development, reservoirs planned for the Sulphur River drainage would be extremely damaging to bear recovery in Northeast Texas.

Black bears are omnivorous and highly opportunistic. Although they’ll eat nearly any available food, including carrion, they’re primarily vegetarian. Bears emerging from dens in early spring feed on green vegetation such as grasses and greenbrier,

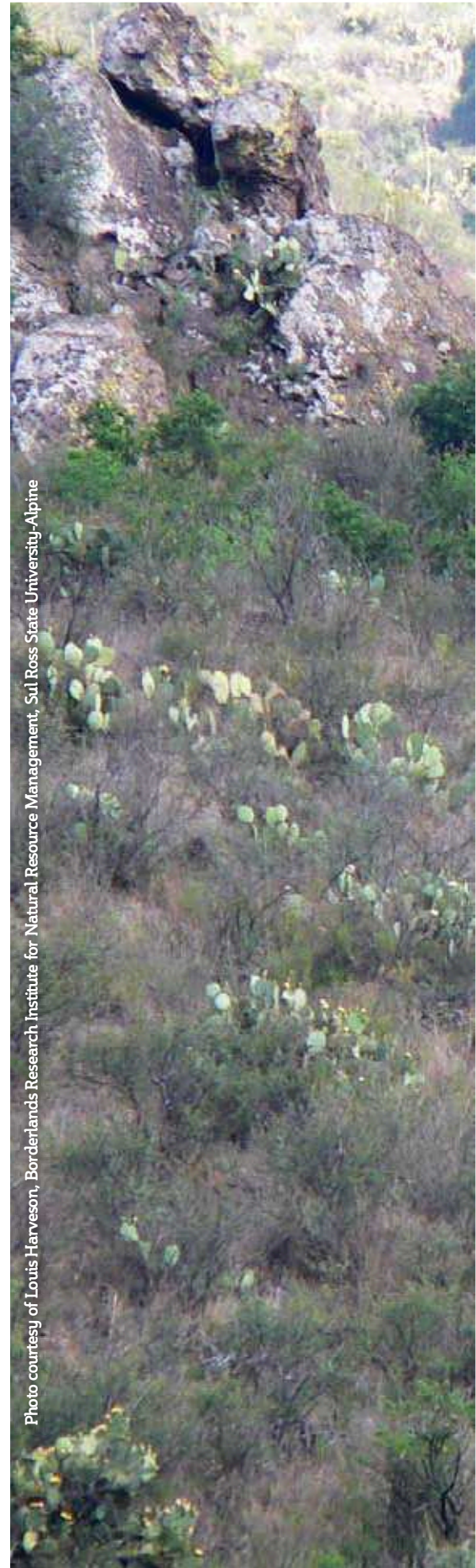


Photo courtesy of Louis Harveson, Borderlands Research Institute for Natural Resource Management, Sul Ross State University-Alpine





Photo by Grady Allen

THE FIRST BLACK BEAR sighting in Big Bend National Park in 50 years occurred in 1984. Today, a small breeding population roams the Chisos Mountains, and bears continue to expand in the Trans-Pecos.

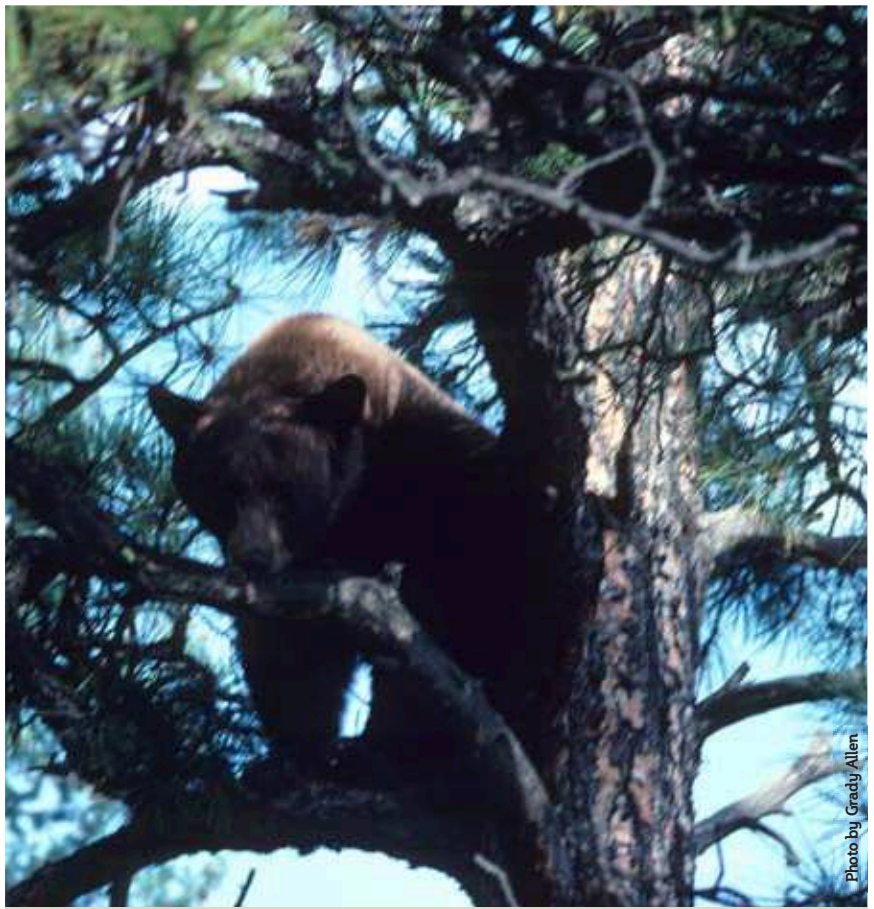


Photo by Grady Allen

MOST BLACK BEARS are indeed black, but cinnamon coats are common among bears in the west.



then switch to fruit and soft mast in late spring and early summer. Blackberries, dogwood, persimmon and muscadine are important during growing season, as are

a decrease in body temperature, metabolism, and heart rate. In the Deep South, including East Texas, bears typically den from late November through early January.

Denning black bears use ground nests, openings in the bases of trees, and ground burrows. Lacking better options, bears may simply spend their torpid period lying in the ground in heavy cover.

In the Trans-Pecos, riparian areas in the desert mountains serve as primary black bear habitat. Oak and sotol are among the most important food-producing species. Amazingly, a few bears scratch out a living in the desert proper.

Most black bears come by their name honestly, especially in the eastern United States, although cinnamon coats are common among some western subspecies, and black bears can be nearly white in British Columbia. Although the Latin word luteolus means “yellowish,” Louisiana black bears are similar in appearance to Eastern black bears and can be distinguished by a slightly longer, narrower skull and larger molars.

Black bears measure five to six feet in length, two to three feet high at the shoulder. Weight varies considerably depending on food supply. Adult males typically weigh

200-475 pounds. Females run 120-250 pounds.

BEARING DOWN

So black bears have repatriated West Texas and are coming to East Texas and the Hill Country. What’s to be done?

The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department developed the East Texas Black Bear Conservation and Management Plan 2005-2015 to promote public awareness and provide landowners and agency personnel with the technical knowledge to increase and enhance bear habitat.

One of the first actions under the Management Plan was the formation of the East Texas Black Bear Task Force, a partnership between the public and private sector aimed

at helping government agencies work effectively with landowners to restore bears in East Texas. The Task Force meets multiple times per year to address bear-related issues from diverse perspectives.

TPWD also publishes a bear management guide for landowners and offers incentives for planting approved species of hardwood trees in potential black bear habitat.

Research continues. In a 1998 habitat study, Garner and his colleagues rated the Middle Neches River corridor, with its abundant food and cover, low potential for human-bear conflict, and low highway density, the highest quality habitat in the state. The results of a newer study, on Northeast Texas habitat, done in cooperation with Stephen F. Austin State University, will be published next year. Currently biologists are in the field in southeastern Texas, using the latest satellite imagery and vegetation maps to update the 1998 study.

“Bears really aren’t the pure wilderness animals we thought they were back in the 50s and 60s,” Garner said. “They can adjust their patterns and disappear when they need to. If New Jersey (one of the most densely populated states) can have a healthy bear population, then Texas can certainly have one.”

Garner believes that the trend toward purchasing East Texas forestland for recreation may accelerate black bear recovery. “This is strictly my own opinion, but I believe that within a certain expanding demographic, property with bears will be more valuable than property without bears.”

Yes, and worth more money, too. 🐻



A RESEARCHER CARRIES a wild Louisiana black bear cub as part of a restoration effort.

insects such as bumblebees, honeybees and ants. During the fall, an abundance of high-calorie hardwood mast is critical for building fat reserves prior to denning.

In good habitat, female black bears usually reach sexual maturity at 3-5 years of age; males at 3-4 years of age. Dominant males may mate with several females. Black bears breed in summer; cubs are born in the den in January and February. Twins are most common, but litter sizes range from one to five. Cubs typically stay with their mother 15-17 months, until she comes into estrus again.

Black bears don’t truly hibernate. In order to survive winter food shortages, they go dormant, a process known as carnivorean lethargy or torpor, characterized by



BEAR IN MIND

East Texas Black Bear Conservation and Management Plan 2005-2015 - www.tpwd.state.tx.us/publications/pwdpubs/media/pwd_pl_w7000_1046.pdf

East Texas Black Bear Task Force - www.bbcc.org/etbbtf/default.aspx
Bear Safety for Hunters: www.tpwd.state.tx.us/publications/pwdpubs/media/pwd_br_w7000_1428.pdf

If you see a bear, contact Texas Parks and Wildlife Department at (800) 792-1112

