

The Florida Black Bear – A vanishing species

Since being hired as the Natural Resource Specialist for the Highlands Soil and Water Conservation Service, I have learned a lot about the Florida Black Bear. When visiting the various ranches to talk to the producers about their contracts, they often mention this amazing animal. It would seem that many of our landowners are frequently visited by these timid creatures. Some have even told tales of the mom bear and her cubs and how they inhabit certain areas of their property. Unfortunately, these once abundant animals are quickly disappearing. Perhaps if we knew more about these critters, we would be better able to protect them.

Bears travel in what is called a home range. This is the area in which they search for food, water and shelter. Generally this area consists of 50 to 120 square miles for the males and 10 to 25 square miles for the female. So you see they need a lot of territory to survive.

As we all know, with new development and urbanization coming into our sunshine state, these habitats are being destroyed rapidly. Many of their territories now have major highways and roads going through and many bears are killed by automobiles striking them. Often times, bears will cross these roads in search of food or a mate. In fact, according to Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, approximately 90% of the known bear mortalities have been caused by vehicles.

Besides mankind, an adult black bear has no predators, except perhaps other bears. As stated above, the main cause of death of these creatures is vehicle collisions, however some do die of starvation, mostly due to lack of habitat and of course, poaching. It is believed that the average bear would live to be about 15 years old if no circumstances caused its death before that.

Bears are timid creatures, and if you are fortunate enough to see one in the wild, chances are very good that it will run away from you. Because bears have an amazing sense of smell, they generally know you are there before you would ever get a glimpse of them. It is important, as with all wild animals, that people do not feed them. When a wild animal is fed by a human being, it loses its fear and becomes dangerous. No known bear attacks have been reported in Florida, however it is always important to keep your distance from any wild animal and have a healthy respect for them. Feeding wildlife is not only against the law, it is very dangerous.

The Florida black bear is a large mammal. As its name implies, it is black in coloration and sometimes has a tan muzzle and a lighter colored chest blaze. They have rounded ears, a short tail, 5-toed feet and large canine teeth. An adult male generally will weigh between 250-450 pounds; females usually weigh in at 125-250 pounds. These creatures can run up to 30 miles an hour and are quite adept at climbing trees.

Bears eat plants and animals, thus they are considered omnivores. Their diet consists mainly of acorns, nuts and berries. Of course, being a Floridian, they enjoy Saw Palmetto berries, which is a mainstay of their diet. They also eat insects and meat. In fact, they have been known to snack on armadillos, hogs, opossums, snakes and alligator eggs.

In the winter months, mostly because of scarcity of food, black bears hibernate. In Florida, the bears do not sleep as deeply as in the north as the temperatures do not get as low. Bears may only hibernate for a few weeks or even a month unless pregnant. If the female is pregnant, she will hibernate for the winter and give birth to her cubs in the den she chooses for that purpose. The dens may be found in hollowed out trees, ground cavities or downed wood and logs.

It is unfortunate to see the numbers of these magnificent creatures declining so rapidly. At one time these bears numbered over 12,000; today there are an estimated 2,500 remaining. It is critical that

we, as human beings, help to maintain healthy bear populations in an effort to conserve the diversity of Florida's native species.

If you have a desire to help this declining species, there are many ways you can assist. Be aware of the decisions and choices of your local government and let your voice be heard regarding wildlife and loss of habitat issues. Decisions such as road planning, wildlife crossings and land management are all subjects you can get involved with. Log on to <http://www.defenders.org/index.php> and see the many programs that are available to help these animals.

Photo compliments of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission