

Managing Conflicts with Wildlife: Living with Bears¹

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Black bears are omnivorous, enigmatic animals that are an important part of Florida's ecosystems. Bears may help maintain healthy forests by dispersing seeds of plants they eat. Bear watching is a favorite pastime for many Floridians throughout the state.

Bears are generally secretive and rarely a problem for people. However, there are rare situations where bears can become dangerous or damaging. In this document, we present some facts about bears, describe dangers and problems they may cause, and provide suggestions on how to cope with these issues.

Getting to know black bears

- The Florida black bear (*Ursus americanus floridanus*) is one of several subspecies of what is known as the American black bear (Figure 1); a native species and only member of the bear family (Ursidae) in Florida.
- There are an estimated 3,000 bears in Florida, in seven populations (Figure 2).
- Florida bear numbers dwindled to just a few hundred in the 1970s, prompting their listing as a state-threatened species. Due to conservation efforts, the statewide bear population recovered enough to remove it from the threatened species list in 2012, and a limited hunt was initiated in 2015.
- Black bears are large mammals with large canine teeth, 5-toed feet, rounded ears, and relatively short, stubby tails.
- In Florida, they are typically a solid black color, occasionally having a tan muzzle and/or a blonde chest marking (Figure 3); black bears outside of the Southeast often exhibit other color phases, such as blonde, blue, brown, or even white.
- Florida bear size and weight vary with food supply, with adult males (250–450 lbs) larger than females (125–250 lbs).



Figure 1. The Florida black bear.
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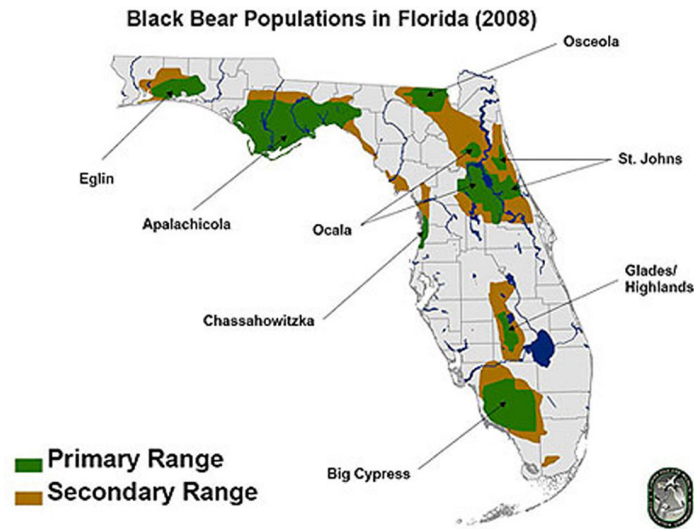


Figure 2. Range of black bears in Florida.
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Figure 3. Chest marking found on some Florida black bears.
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- Bears have good eyesight, acute hearing, and an exceptional sense of smell. They are able to pick up scent from over a mile away! Bears are also good climbers and fast runners (up to 35 mph).
- Bears are relatively quiet animals, but will use bawls, grunts, growls, and moans, as well as blows, stares, and facial expressions such as lip protrusions to communicate. They also communicate through scent and may mark trees by biting, rubbing, and clawing.
- Bear sign includes tracks (Figure 4), marked trees, and scats.
- Florida black bears use a variety of habitat types from flatwoods to swamps to scrub, but they prefer areas with abundant fruits and nuts. Acorns and palmetto berries are favorite bear foods in Florida.



Figure 4. A black bear track.
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- Bears are omnivores, with about 80% of their diet being plants, 15% insects, and 5% mammals. They are always looking for food and are attracted to garbage, pet food, crops, wildlife feeders, beehives, and many other human-provided food sources.
- They typically breed in June–July, but implantation and development of the embryos is delayed until November–December. Embryos then develop for 8–12 weeks and 2–3 cubs are born in late winter in the female's den. Bears are sexually mature by 3 years of age.
- Whether black bears are true hibernators or not has been widely debated, but recent research showing that they have reduced metabolism, body temperatures, and activity during the winter months suggests that they may belong in this category. Hibernation is a response to reduced food supplies and colder temperatures, and typically occurs in dens. Bears in the South hibernate for shorter periods and sleep less deeply than bears in northern areas. Some bears in Florida may not hibernate at all.
- Dens are typically on the ground in thick vegetation, but may be in tree cavities, under logs, or in blow downs.
- Cubs remain with their mother for about one and a half years and den with her the winter following birth.
- Typically, males are solitary except when breeding, and females will be with their offspring until the young are independent.
- Florida bears can be fairly long-lived, with the oldest wild bears living for 24 years.

- Bear mortality is greatest during the first year of life, with drowning, starvation, and various accidents as leading causes of death. Adults have higher survival rates, with vehicle collisions, starvation, and poaching as leading causes of mortality.
- In Florida, adult males range over 32,000–77,000 acres and females over 6,000–16,000 acres, with variability due to season and food availability.

Potential risks and damage associated with black bears

- The opportunistic and omnivorous habits of bears and their attraction to human-subsidized food sources (e.g., garbage; Figure 5) lead to many conflicts with people. With many growing Florida black bear populations in close proximity to urban areas (e.g., Orlando) and habituation to people, the number of conflicts has risen dramatically in recent years. It is illegal to feed bears in Florida, either intentionally or unintentionally.



Figure 5. Garbage must be secured in bear country.
Credits: B. Kolhoff

- Bears consume crops (including oranges) and feed put out for pets, livestock, and wildlife; they will damage feeders and other structures to get to food resources.
- Black bears are typically quiet, shy animals that avoid people. But they are large, powerful, and fast; bear encounters can be dangerous.
- People have been scratched and bitten by black bears in Florida. Most human-bear conflicts are created by people. The majority of these incidents occurred when bears were defending themselves, their young, or a food source.
- Bears will sometimes bluff a charge at a person to get them to leave them alone.

How to prevent risks and damage associated with black bears

- If you live in bear country, you may see bears in your neighborhood regularly, but a bear sighting does not necessarily mean there is a problem, and in fact it can provide a unique and rewarding experience. However, precautions must be taken to avoid conflicts.
- Properly storing or securing garbage (Figure 6) or other items that may attract bears around homes and neighborhoods is a must. Anything that attracts dogs, cats, raccoons, and similar animals will also attract bears.



Figure 6. Bear-proof garbage in bear country.
Credits: www.myfwc.com

- Store garbage cans in a secure building or area, and take them to the curb the morning of pickup instead of the night before.
- Feed pets and secure their food inside.
- Do not keep food, pet food, garbage, or anything that might attract bears on screen porches, even in a refrigerator, freezer, or cabinet.
- Clean barbeque grills and securely store them after use.
- Hang wildlife and bird feeders out of reach of bears and remove them if a bear is in the area.
- Protect gardens, beehives, and livestock with electric fencing.
- If you see a bear at a distance, enjoy it but remain calm and do not make any sudden movements or go towards it, and be sure it has a clear escape path. Never approach or surprise a bear! If the bear changes its behavior because of your presence or activity, you are too close.
- If you accidentally come across a bear at close range:

- Slowly stand upright and raise your arms to make yourself appear larger.
- Speak to the bear in a strong, assertive voice.
- Back away slowly to a safe area such as a building or a car, but be sure you are leaving the bear a clear escape route. Once you are in a secure area, try to scare the bear away with loud noises (honking horns or banging pots and pans together). Stop and hold your ground if your movements appear to annoy the bear rather than calm it or scare it away.
 - Avoid direct eye contact.
 - Never run or make sudden movements.
 - Never play dead (black bears eat dead things and things that play dead).
 - Never climb a tree (black bears are exceptional tree climbers).
- Bring children and pets into a secure area like a house, building, or car.
- If you are attacked by a black bear:
 - Aggressively fight back with any objects or even your bare hands.
 - Never run from a bear (black bears can out run you, and running may trigger a chase response).
- Report a bear attack immediately to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission at 1-888-404-3922. If you are having conflicts and would like assistance, contact the nearest Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission regional office (<http://myfwc.com/contact/>).

More Information

<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/uw250>—UF/IFAS extension document providing information on dealing with nuisance bears in Florida

<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/uw201>—UF/IFAS extension document providing information on the biology of large carnivores, including bears, in Florida

<http://myfwc.com/bear>—Information on bear ecology and conservation provided by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission