

Conflicts between People and the Florida Black Bear¹

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The Florida Black Bear

The Florida black bear (*Ursus americanus floridanus*) is a unique subspecies of the American black bear, the only species of bear found in Florida (Main et al. 2004; Annis et al. 2002). In 2002, biologists in the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) estimated that there were between 2,500 and 3,000 black bears in Florida.

Adult males typically weigh between 250 and 350 lbs. Adult females are smaller, and usually weigh between 130 and 180 lbs.

Bear home ranges are large. The range for an adult female is approximately 15 square miles (9,600 acres). The range for an adult male is approximately 60 square miles (38,400 acres). Bear ranges overlap, which means that multiple bears may be found in any geographic area. Although more submissive bears will avoid dominant males, black bears will congregate at abundant food sources because their need for food overrides their natural fear of one another.

Black bears are omnivorous. About 80 percent of their diet comes from plants (e.g. acorns, nuts, berries, and other vegetation). Another 15 percent of their diet is made up of insects (e.g. termites and ants). The rest of their diet (5 percent) is made up of meat (e.g. opossums, armadillos, and carrion), most of which they find by scavenging.

The Need to Eat: Why Bears Come into Conflict with People

Because of their daily calorie requirements, black bears are constantly searching for food. An adult black bear may eat up to 20,000 calories per day, which is about the calorie content of 38 Big Mac sandwiches. Black bears are opportunistic feeders with an excellent sense of smell. A black bear can smell food from one to two miles away. Their sense of smell combined with their need for large quantities of calories attracts black bears to human settlements. Garbage is the main attractant, but bears are also attracted by bee hives, pet food, barbecue grills, fruit trees, and bird (or wildlife) feeders. This means that residential areas provide bears with an easy source of high-calorie foods.



Figure 1. A Florida black bear searching for food. Prevent problems before they start with bear-resistant garbage cans.
Credits: FWC

1. This document is WEC344, one of a series of the Wildlife Ecology and Conservation Department, UF/IFAS Extension. Original publication date September 2014. Visit the EDIS website at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.
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Even though black bears have a natural fear of humans, their need to survive will keep them in close proximity to readily available food. Conflicts between people and black bears arise when people fail to remove or secure potential food sources. In their search for food, black bears may damage people's property. They may also threaten, injure, or kill pets and livestock in order to gain access to pet and livestock feed (see also Annis et al. 2002).

Reports of Human-Bear Conflicts in Florida

Both the black bear population and the population of people in Florida are growing, which is contributing to increased conflicts between people and bears. Between 2010 and 2013, the human population in Florida increased by 4 percent. Today, 19.6 million people live in Florida (<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/12000.html>). Unsurprisingly, the number of calls by the public to the FWC to report bear-related issues has risen. Between 2009 and 2012 the FWC logged 17,769 bear-related calls from the public (or approximately 4,400 calls per year).

Based on these calls, human-bear conflicts tend to be geographically concentrated with 10 counties accounting for 81 percent (14,326) of all reported human-bear conflicts. Over half of reported conflicts were logged in the northeastern counties of Florida (see map) with Lake, Volusia, Marion, and Seminole counties totaling 8,134 calls (46 percent of all reported bear-related issues). One third of reported bear-related issues occurred in the northwestern counties. Far fewer conflicts were reported for the southern, southwestern, and north-central regions of Florida (Table 1).

Type of Conflicts Reported: 2009–2012

Bear-related calls to the FWC are categorized based on the most serious human-bear conflict reported, i.e. the conflict that is most likely to result in a public safety risk (Table 2). For example, based on the FWC classification system, if a person reports that a bear entered his or her yard, accessed their garbage, and threatened pets, then the report is recorded as the bear "threatened an animal." Based on reports to the FWC of human-bear conflicts, the most common conflict is bears accessing garbage (35 percent all reports for 2009–2012). In total, 6,872 calls (39 percent) were reports of a bear accessing human sources of food (see Table 2). These data underscore the fact that bears come into conflict with people because of food attractants.

Ways to Prevent Human-Bear Conflicts

There are multiple ways to prevent conflicts with bears:

Secure trash: Bear-resistant garbage containers are one of the best methods to prevent bears from eating garbage. Trash should be kept inside a closed garage, a sturdy shed, a secure structure, or a bear-resistant container until the morning of pickup, rather than placing the trashcan curbside the night before pickup. If trash pickup is too early for this to be feasible, then residents can ask waste service providers to change their routes for later pickup. The FWC also provides instructions on how to modify garbage cans to make them more secure from bears (see <http://myfwc.com/media/2384072/Combined-Retrofit-kit-directions.pdf>). Residents can contact their waste service company to request the provision of bear-resistant trashcans. Alternatively, residents can contact their local elected officials about requiring companies who bid on waste service contracts to make bear-resistant trashcans available to residents.

Clean and secure grills/smokers: Grills and smokers should be cleaned after each use with a degreasing agent and should be stored in a secure area.

Secure bird feeders: If a bear is feeding from bird feeders, then there are ways to hang bird feeders to prevent bears from accessing them. Feeders should be a minimum of 10 feet off the ground and 4 feet from any attachment points. Shelled seed should be put in the feeder and a catch pan should be used to capture waste seed. Only sufficient seed for a single day should be put out at one time, and the feeder should be brought inside at night.

Secure wildlife feeders: There are two possible methods of preventing bear damage to wildlife feeders. Food plots may be used rather than wildlife feeders (see: Willcox et al. 2007; <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/uw262> for information on constructing food plots for white-tailed deer). Alternatively, automatic feeders may be used to provide wildlife with grains. Information on the placement and design of automatic wildlife feeders is provided by the FWC (see: <http://myfwc.com/wildlifehabitats/managed/bear/wildlife-feeders/>).

Secure pet feed and domestic animals: If a bear is raiding pet or livestock feed, then people should only put out enough feed for a single day. Feed containers should be brought inside at night, if possible. Bulk feed should be stored in a secure building. To prevent food aggression, secure animals away from their feed. Bring pets in at night,

or keep pets and livestock in an enclosure with an electric fence at night if animals are being threatened by bears. People should also flash outside lights and make loud noises to scare away bears before going outside or letting pets out after dark. If a bear attacks or kills an animal, the FWC will typically schedule a visit by a field biologist or contractor to investigate the situation to determine if further action is needed.

Electric fencing and other deterrents: Electric fencing is the best means to secure outdoor attractants, including bee hives (see also Sanford and Ellis 2012). The FWC also provides advice on how to construct "unwelcome mats" (see <http://myfwc.com/media/2394983/Unwelcome-Mat-Instructions.pdf>) for keeping bears away from specific outdoor areas (e.g., freezers on porches). People can purchase various infra-red motion activated devices that emit sound or start a water sprinkler when a bear enters a particular space.

Stay away from bears: If a bear is in the area, enters the yard, or is in a tree, then the bear is likely passing through the neighborhood and is not necessarily a cause for concern. However, if the bear is lingering in the neighborhood, then the behavior of the bear is important. In those instances where a bear is in the yard people should get a safe distance away from the bear or go to a safe location (e.g., inside the home or vehicle). They should also scare the bear off with loud noises (e.g., an air or car horn), in order to reinforce the bear's natural fear of humans.

How to Report Conflicts with Bears

The FWC is responsible for managing the Florida black bear, but the public also has a role to play in reducing conflicts with bears. Most conflicts with bears arise because people do not secure food sources, most importantly garbage. Although it may seem like a nuisance to remove or secure food attractants, people's willingness to do so will help with bear conservation efforts. A fed bear is a dead bear. Bears that become reliant on human food sources or lose their fear of humans are likely to be euthanized to prevent them from injuring a person. Securing or removing food attractants will also help to prevent bears from damaging your neighbors' properties. This document summarizes some of the methods that may be used by members of the public to reduce or prevent bear-related issues. Additional information can be obtained on the FWC website: <http://myfwc.com/bear/>.

FLORIDA FISH AND WILDLIFE CONSERVATION COMMISSION HEADQUARTERS AND REGIONAL OFFICES

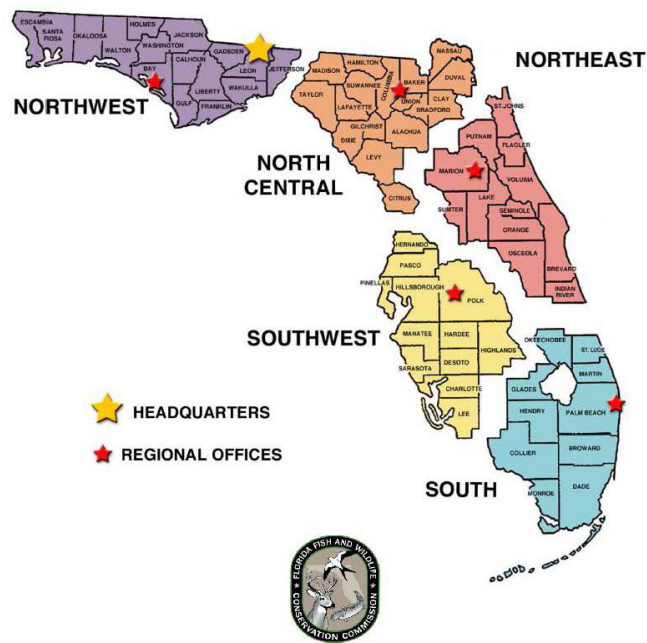


Figure 2. Fish and Wildlife Conservation offices in Florida
Credits: FWC

To help the FWC better manage the Florida black bear, you should report any human-bear conflicts to the FWC. The contact details for the regional offices are:

Northwest Region

3911 Hwy. 2321
Panama City, FL 32409-1658
850-265-3676
Hours: Monday–Friday, 7 a.m. to 4 p.m. (Central)

Northeast Region

1239 S.W. 10th Street
Ocala, FL 34471-0323
352-732-1225
Hours: Monday–Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. (Eastern)

North Central Region

3377 E. U.S. Highway 90
Lake City, FL 32055-8795
386-758-0525
Hours: Monday–Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. (Eastern)

South Region

8535 Northlake Boulevard
West Palm Beach, FL 33412
561-625-5122
Hours: Monday–Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. (Eastern)

Southwest Region

3900 Drane Field Road

References

Annis, K. M., M. E. Sunkuist, and W. M. Giuliano. 2011. *Living with the Florida Black Bear: a Homeowner's Guide to Nuisance Bear Prevention*. WEC215. Gainesville: University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences. Available at: <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/uw250>

Main, M. B., G. M. Allen, and M. E. Sunkuist. 2004. *Florida's Large Carnivores*. WEC183. Gainesville: University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences. Available at: <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/uw201>

Sanford, M. T. and J. D. Ellis. 2012. *Florida Bears and Beekeeping*. ENY105. Gainesville: University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences. Available at: <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/aa133>

Willcox, E. V., B. J. Schad, W. M. Giuliano, and J. F. Selph. 2007. *Establishment of Food Plots for White-tailed Deer in Central and South Florida*. WEC223. Gainesville: University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences. Available at: <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/uw262>

Table 1. Reports of Bear-Related Issues from 2009 to 2012.

Region	Number of Reports	Percent of Reports
Northeast	9,872	55.6
Northwest	5,924	33.3
South	1,148	6.5
Southwest	421	2.4
North Central	404	2.3
Total	17,769	100

Table 2. Most Egregious Reported Human-Bear Conflicts.

Report	Description	Number	Percent
In garbage	Bear has been raiding the garbage	6,281	35.3
In area	Bear sighted in the area (including a neighbor's yard), but bear did not engage in any activity that might be considered human-bear conflict	3,581	20.2
In yard	Bear entered the caller's yard	2,211	12.4
Property damage	Bear damaged caller's property, including (but not limited to) a cooler, freezer, grill, fence	1,869	10.5
In tree	Bear was sighted in a tree	730	4.1
Dead bear	Dead bear found by the caller	693	3.9
Sick/injured bear	Sick or injured bear was reported to the FWC	658	3.7
Killed animal	Bear killed a domestic animal (pet or livestock)	395	2.2
In feeder	Bear damaged or has been eating from bird and wildlife feeders (including deer feeders)	252	1.4
In feed	Bear has been eating domestic animals' food (e.g. dog food, catfish chow or horse feed)	247	1.4
Other	Usually an incident during which a bear is caught in a hog trap	177	1.0
In building	Bear entered a dwelling in which people live (excluding a garage, shed or screened porch)	160	0.9
Attacked animal	Bear attacked an animal, either a pet or livestock	136	0.8
Threatened animal	Bear threatened a domestic animal (pet or livestock)	124	0.7
Threatened human	Bear threatened a person	117	0.7
Apiary	Bear in the bee yard or among bee hives	57	0.3
In crops	Bear damaged crops (e.g. corn, peanuts or trees)	35	0.2
Not specified		46	0.3
Total		17,769	100

Lakeland, FL 33811-1207

863-648-3200

Hours: Monday–Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. (Eastern)