

Living with the Florida Black Bear: a Homeowner's Guide to Nuisance Bear Prevention¹

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Figure 1. A Florida Black Bear in Northwestern Florida
Credits: Kimberly M. Annis, July 23, 2002.

The American black bear (*Ursus americanus*) occurs throughout many states and provinces in North America. It is the most widely distributed bear in North America. The Florida black bear (*U. a. floridanus*) (Figure 1) is a recognized subspecies of the American black bear. Before European settlement, the Florida black bear ranged throughout mainland Florida, and even inhabited some coastal islands and larger keys.

Human encroachment, deforestation and development of prime bear habitat have resulted in a significant decline in the distribution of black bears in North America. In Florida, this rapid conversion of bear habitat has resulted in a severe decline in the number of bears, eliminating them from about 80% of their former range. This decline resulted in the listing of the Florida black bear as a state threatened species by 1974 throughout Florida, except in Columbia and Baker counties, and the Apalachicola National Forest. The Florida black bear is now restricted to six core and two remnant populations in areas of largely undisturbed habitat (Figure 2). Information on the ecology of Florida black bears can be found at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/UW055>.

Bears and People

Black bears have an omnivorous diet. Approximately 80% of their diet consists of plant matter and 20% is comprised of insects and meat. For a large mammalian carnivore they have the unique ability to live in a wide variety of habitats and consume a wide range of foods. This ability enables them to live in close proximity to humans. In Florida, human expansion into bear habitat has led to an

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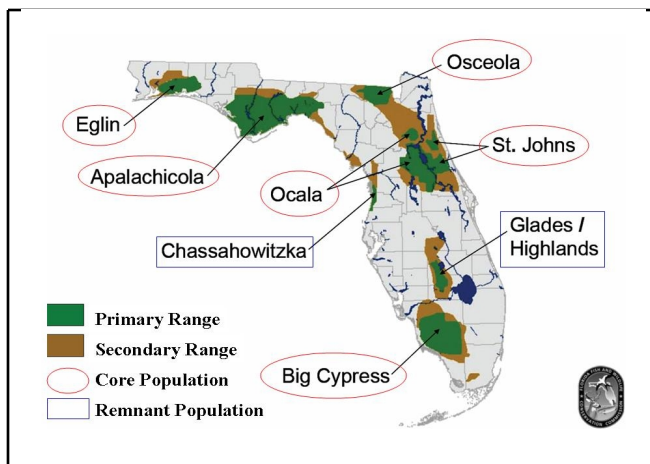


Figure 2. Current Florida Black Bear Range in Florida
Credits: Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation
Commission Bear Management and Research, 2005.

increase in human-bear interactions. This is especially true in regions of Florida where bear populations are near heavily-developed neighborhoods, such as the Ocala National Forest and its surrounding suburban communities.

Conflicts between humans and bears are most often created by people. Bears are opportunistic foragers that are often attracted to residential areas by human-food odors. Bears usually avoid people, but garbage, pet food, and bird feeders left outside can draw bears to residences or businesses. Easy access to non-natural food may cause a bear to associate food with people. When human-habituation (bears tolerating people at close distances) is combined with food-conditioning (the association of non-natural food with people) human-bear conflicts can quickly develop. Feeding bears is against the law (Florida Administrative Code 68A-4.001(3)) and, if convicted, a person could be sentenced to up to 60 days in jail, or received a \$500.00 fine. In addition to being illegal, feeding black bears increases the potential for human injury and private property damage.

Living in Bear Country

The presence of a black bear in a residential area does not necessarily represent a problem. Living in bear country can provide a unique and rewarding experience for some people. Properly storing or securing garbage and other possible attractants is a proven method for preventing nuisance problems

around homes and neighborhoods. Anything that might attract a cat, dog or raccoon can also attract a bear. By following the guidelines below you can help ensure the well-being of the people and bears in your area.

If a bear enters your yard or neighborhood, look for attractants that might be drawing it there and secure them:

- Clean barbeque grills and store them in a secure building after use.
- Take garbage to the curb the morning of pickup, not the night before.
- Store garbage cans in a sturdy building or other secure area.
- Feed pets inside and store pet food securely.
- Do not store pet food, garbage or other attractants on screened porches.
- Do not store food of any kind outside or on a screened porch, even in a refrigerator or freezer.
- Protect gardens, ornamental trees and livestock with electric fencing.
- Hang wildlife feeders out of reach of bears and take them down if a bear is in the area.

Bear Encounters

Even if all potential food sources are secured, a bear may enter your yard or neighborhood simply because it is passing through the area. Their constant search for new food sources may draw them into urban areas temporarily. Black bears are not generally aggressive even when confronted by humans. However, they are large and powerful wild animals that need to be respected. They will sometimes “bluff-charge” when they are cornered, feel threatened, or if they are defending a food source.

If you encounter a bear:

- Remain calm and do not run.

- Do not approach the bear and give it plenty of space to retreat.
- Make your presence known by making noise, then back away slowly.
- Bring children and pets inside the house.
- Let the bear know it is not welcome in your yard; make yourself appear large by raising your arms and standing tall. Yell or bang pots and pans to scare the bear away.
- If the bear will not leave, move to your house, car, or a building until the bear leaves on its own.

Northeast Region

Ocala, Florida: (352) 732-1225; 24-Hour Law Enforcement: (352) 732-1228

South Region

West Palm Beach, Florida: (561) 625-5122; 24-Hour Law Enforcement: (561) 625-5122

Monroe and Collier County 24-Hour Law Enforcement: (305) 289-2320

Reporting Bear Sightings

A single wandering bear can be responsible for numerous sightings reported to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC). If you encounter a bear in your area, are experiencing nuisance problems or property damage, or if a bear is threatening the safety of humans, pets or livestock, it should be reported to the nearest FWC regional office. Additional FWC information about the Florida black bear can be found at <http://myfwc.com/bear/>.

Phone Numbers for Florida Fish and Wildlife Regional Offices:

Northwest Region

Panama City, Florida: (850) 265-3676; 24-Hour Law Enforcement: (850) 245-7710

Southwest Region

Lakeland, Florida: (863) 648-3200; 24-Hour Law Enforcement: (813)558-5050

North Central Region

Lake City, Florida: (386) 758-0525; 24-Hour Law Enforcement: (386) 758-0529