

BE BEAR AWARE

FLORIDA BLACK BEAR FACT SHEET

(August 2009)

HISTORY

The Florida black bear (*Ursus americanus floridanus*) is a unique subspecies of the American black bear (*U. americanus*), and historically ranged throughout Florida and southern portions of adjoining states. Today, Florida black bears occupy 17-18% of their historic range in Florida. The State of Florida has listed the Florida black bear as a threatened species.

RANGE

Historically, black bears ranged throughout the southeast with the Florida subspecies inhabiting all of Florida, including the upper keys and portions of southern Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi. The distribution in Florida has been significantly reduced and fragmented into six large (Apalachicola National Forest, Osceola National Forest, Ocala National Forest, Eglin Air Force Base, St. Johns River area and Big Cypress National Preserve) and two small (Chassahowitzka, Glades/Highlands) remnant populations.

HABITAT

Florida black bears thrive in dense habitats that provide an annual supply of seasonally available foods, secluded areas for denning, and some degree of protection from humans. The optimal bear habitat in Florida is a mixture of flatwoods, swamps, scrub oak ridges, bayheads and hammock habitats. Some populations are found within large forested tracts that contain understories of mast or berry-producing shrubs or trees. Habitats with pine flatwoods, tropical hammocks and hardwood swamps of the Big Cypress National Preserve, and the xeric sand pine-scrub oak community growing in the Ocala National Forest support large and healthy populations of bears as well.

PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS

Florida black bears are large-bodied with a shiny, black coat of fur, light brown nose and snout and short tail. Some bears have white diamond-shaped patterns on their chests. Adult males typically weigh 250-350 pounds and females 130-180 pounds. Their body weights may increase by 25-40% in the fall in order to store enough energy to survive the winter. The bears are about 5-6 feet long and are about three feet high at the shoulder. Adult females attain sexual maturity about 3-4 years old. Breeding season is from mid-June to mid-August, and cubs are born in late-January to mid-February. Cubs weigh about 12 ounces when born and

are relatively undeveloped. By the time they leave the den at about 10 weeks old, the cubs weigh about six to eight pounds but continue to stay with their mother until they are about 15-17 months old.

NUISANCE PREVENTION

Human-bear interactions have become a greater concern in Florida as both human and bear populations increase and human development encroaches on existing bear habitat. The number of bear related calls in Florida have increased nearly 700% in the past 10 years with complaints that include bears sighting in buildings, in livestock feed, in garbage or threatening animals and humans. The first step in resolving problems is eliminating food sources that attract bears. When bears are allowed to forage non-natural food sources such as pet food, garbage and other attractants, they become conditioned to humans and often become a threat to human safety. For each conflict incident, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) evaluates why bears are causing problems. Most can be resolved through simple actions such as taking down bird feeders, storing pet food, or storing garbage in areas not easily accessible to bears. It is equally important for people to be patient. It may take several

days bears to realize the inaccessibility to free meals. In most cases, bears will move on when food sources are no longer present. If conflicts persist after attractants are secured management actions may be required to reduce negative human-bear interactions.

CONSERVATION EFFORTS

Habitat loss and fragmentation has greatly impacted bears in Florida. The intent is to keep a healthy statewide bear population by striking a compatible balance between what the species needs to exist in a viable state and what people need and gain from their existence. Long term conservation of the black bear is dependent upon prudent woodlands management and community partnerships.

HUMAN-BEAR ENCOUNTERS

The majority of human-bear interactions are positive or neutral in outcome (i.e. sightings that lead to excitement and appreciation, or presence that leads to no response). While there have been no documented bear attacks in Florida, bears should be treated with respect as they are large and powerful wild animals.



BE BEAR AWARE TIPS

Because Florida Black Bears are natural inhabitants of the National Forests in Florida, the U.S. Forest Service implemented a Food Storage Order that defines proper storage and disposal of food, garbage and other attractants. The policy, which took effect June 30, 2009, requires all forest visitors to properly store, possess, secure or dispose of food, garbage and other attractants so that they are not easily accessible to wildlife. (*Food Storage Order No. 2009-01. Violators may be fined*). We ask that you follow this policy which is designed to ensure your health and safety and protection of our natural environment and species. Help us make our forests a pleasant and rewarding outdoor experience for everyone.

Avoid Attracting Bears

- **DO NOT FEED BEARS! It is illegal.**
- Keep a clean site by properly disposing of food scraps and garbage.
- Do not leave food or garbage inside fire rings, grills or around your site.
- Never leave food or coolers unattended.
- Where bear-proof containers are not available, store food and garbage inside hard-sided vehicles or camper trailers.
- Do not cook or store food inside or near your tent.
- Cook food before sunset.
- Wipe tabletops clean before vacating your site.
- If approached by a bear, move away slowly – NEVER run.

Food Storage Order

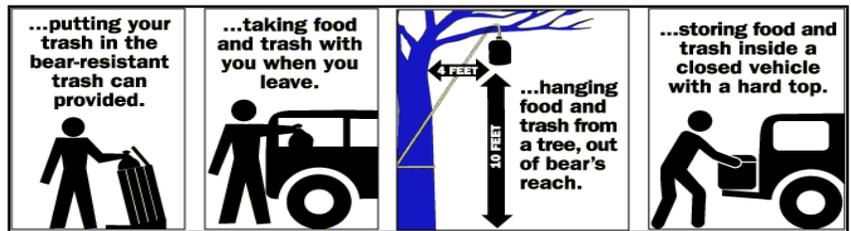
You may not possess, store or leave any food, refuse or bear attractant unless it is:

- properly stored in a bear-resistant container;
- suspended at least 10 feet clear of the ground at all points, suspended at least 4 feet horizontally from any other tree or pole adjacent to the supporting tree or pole;
- stored in a closed, motor vehicle without a soft, convertible top;
- being eaten, being prepared for eating or being transported.

You may not discard or abandon any food, refuse or bear attractant unless it is disposed of in a bear-resistant trash receptacle or dumpster.

You may not burn or bury any food, refuse or bear attractant.

Keep all food, trash or attractants unavailable to bears at night and during the day when unattended. Reduce food attractants by:

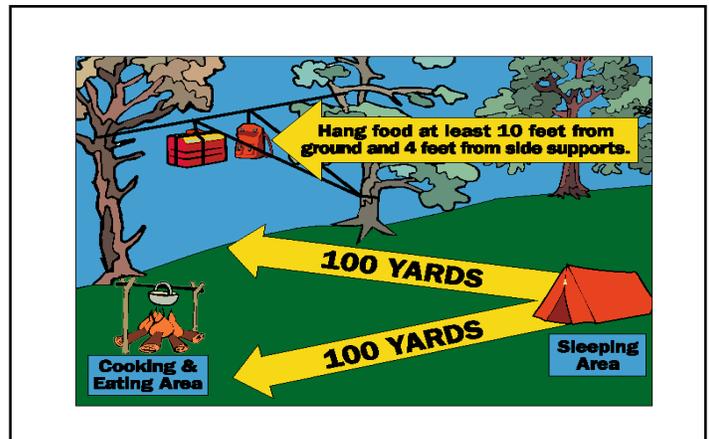


If bear-resistant containers or dumpsters are not readily available, place food and trash in a pack, plastic bag or other type of bag and hang out of reach 10 feet above the ground, at least 4 feet away from the tree(s) and at least 100 yards from your tent.



Attractants include:

Anything having an odor that may attract bears such as food, beverages, cooking grease, toothpaste, toiletries, soap, game meat, carcass part, pet food, bird seed, livestock feed or garbage.



For bear sightings in campsites or recreation areas, contact the on-site Campground Host or Ranger District (RD) Office listed below:

Ocala National Forest

Lake George RD - (352) 625-2520
Lake Seminole RD - (352) 669-3153

Apalachicola National Forest

Apalachicola RD - (850) 643-2282
Wakulla RD - (850) 926-3561

Osceola National Forest

Osceola RD - (386) 752-2577