Conservation Corner

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Bears moving South?

Borrowed from Wisconsin Outdoor News

In sizeable areas of southwest Wisconsin, southeast Minnesota and even northeast Iowa, when a black bear is spotted plodding along a cornfield or a patch of woods, it’s time to grab something.

No, not a gun. A camera. Or more likely these days, a phone camera.

Black bears, which number an estimated 25,000 strong in Wisconsin and 12,000 to 15,000 in Minnesota, are still a novelty of sorts in the Driftless Areas of the three states, but that is slowly, albeit steadily, changing.

More and more bear sightings are taking place, so much so that the Minnesota DNR website has a sightings app where folks can report where they spotted a bear. And according to the Wisconsin DNR, there is indeed a resident bear population in western and southwestern Wisconsin, which means sows with cubs have been consistently spotted.

“There is a southern progression for sure, maybe over the last 30 years. You can see it in the harvest records, going back to the 1970s and 1980s,” said Randy Johnson, the Wisconsin DNR’s large carnivore specialist.

“Most of the harvest is across the northern part of the state. You look at the (DNR) bear plan, and where the harvest was in 1977 – Marathon County was as far south as it went. By 1997, there was a shift (southward). In 2017, there was another layer of counties south that was the harvest boundary, if you will, where it had moved south.

“That is reflective of the harvest. We have taken reports, pictures, etc. of bears in every county of the state,” Johnson said.

That holds true in southeast Minnesota, too, especially along the Mississippi River where the river serves as the boundary separating the two states. Andrew Tri, Minnesota’s DNR bear project leader, said bears would have no problem swimming the Mississippi River. He believes many bears spotted in southeastern Minnesota and northeast Iowa likely migrated from Wisconsin.

“Our hunch is the bears are probably coming from Wisconsin in that area (southeast Minnesota). We don’t know for sure,” Tri said. “The tricky thing with a lot of the bluff country is there are thick forests of oak on north-facing slopes, then pasture, hay or timberland all around it. The bears follow the river corridor and creeks into the oak forest and can be hard to see.”

So why the slow, but steady move south? Why are bears showing up rattling bird feeders as far south as Madison, and Prairie du Chien, which is located in the southern part of Crawford County, and separated from Iowa by the Mississippi River.

It’s a numbers game, in part. An expanding population means bears roam farther into traditional non-bear landscape, and often don’t return to their once-northern home because of ample food supply and habitat in their newfound environment.

“Ten to 20 years ago, I think that is when a lot of them moved south and established populations in the southern area. The established population has grown on its own,” said Eric Huseboe, an avid bear hunter who runs his 20-year-old business – Trophy Adventures Bear Bait – out of his rural Ettrick, home in Trempealeau County.

“I’ve had as many as 17 different bears hitting baits around this area. It is common to have seven to 10 different bears hit bait around here. I have seen it,” Huseboe said.

The natural food source, along with agricultural cropland, has served the southwest Wisconsin bear population well. And to this point, there is limited human-bear conflict.

“We say, somewhat jokingly, is that bears are like a big raccoon. They will eat just about anything. They are just a bigger animal and eat lot more of it,” Johnson said.

“In the spring, they eat the greens, tree buds, aspen.” Anything green in terms of vegetation. Then they go into fasting, and when they come out, their summer diet is bug colonies, fawns. Anything they can get their paws on. Crops? They (bears) are very adaptable. Whatever has nutrition, they will eat,” Johnson said.

Don’t get the wrong idea here, as there is not a large bear population in southwest Wisconsin or southeast Minnesota, where the Minnesota DNR still calls it a “no quota zone.” In fact, Tri said there have only been two or three bears killed in southern Minnesota since 1970.

Take, for example, the 2021 preliminary bear harvest data. Wisconsin’s top two counties, Rusk and Sawyer in the northern tier – had 303 and 292 bears killed this past season out of a total harvest of 3,802. Washburn County was right behind at 285.

In the southern part of the state, La Crosse County had one bear harvested this year, one in 2020, none in 2019 and one in 2018. Vernon County, which borders La Crosse County, saw seven bears harvested each of the last two years. Nearby Juneau County had three bears this year and 11 in 2020.

Jackson County, bordering La Crosse County to the north, has a slightly different story. Jackson County, which contains the 67,000-acre Black River State Forest, there were 38 bears harvested this fall, and 81 in 2020.

“We are in a pretty good place overall. There are some places where bears are not as heavy as others. With our season structure, we maintain a very viable population of bears in this state. There are some issues in agricultural areas,” said Mike Rogers, who lives in the Merrimac area of Sauk County and serves as the chairman of the Conservation Congress’ bear committee.

“The is just the first year for the new (harvest) zones, and the harvest has been quite stable,” Rogers said. Wisconsin’s new six-zone harvest area is another tool for biologists to compile population estimates and other data, Johnson said. Zone E, a west/southwest zone, consists of all, or parts of, 18 counties as far south as Grant and Iowa counties.

“In Zone E, the population is growing. Our estimate right now, the model says there are 842 bears,” Johnson said. “We know it is somewhere between 600 to 1,100 when next fall comes, before the season. We have an indication of a population from 400 to 850 in the last few years.

There is upward growth for sure.” Growth that will likely continue to happen in southwest Wisconsin, southeast Minnesota and northeast Iowa. However, southern bear sightings are still a long way from rivaling the number recorded in the Northwoods of Wisconsin and Minnesota.

“It is kind of funny. I come from southwest Minnesota and when a bear occasionally wanders across the prairie, it’s a big deal,” said Johnson, who is based out of Rhinelander. “Seeing a bear up here is like seeing a deer in the southern part of the state. It is just another bear.”