

THE TEXAS BLACK BEAR

ARTICLE BY JIM HEFFELFINGER

America's Bear

Bears sometimes remind us of our pet dogs for a good reason - the entire bear family evolved from a widespread group of animals that were a mixture of bear-dog characteristics roaming Eurasia millions of years ago. An ancestor of these bear-dog animals started to look less dog-like and entered North America about 20 million years ago. This primitive bear ancestor eventually became what we recognize today as the American Black Bear. The "American" part of its name proudly proclaims the fact that it is uniquely American and not found on any other continent.

Historically, American black bears lived in every state, Canadian province, and the northern Mexican states. Their range is smaller today, but they still range in 40 U.S. states, 12 Canadian provinces, and 6 Mexican states. Black bears are expanding their range and abundance in Ohio, Florida, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Virginia, New York, New Jersey, and many others, leading to discussions of expanding hunting opportunities. Black bears have very general habitat requirements and all they need to thrive are some remote areas and abundant food. Of course, they also seem to thrive in some not so remote areas because they have the ingenuity and intelligence to tap into the abundance of human food sources.

Basic Black Bear Biology

Bears are interesting creatures with some surprising biological quirks. Despite their long claws and sharp teeth, most of their diet is plant material. They are, however, masters at capitalizing on whatever is available and somewhat edible. They feast heavily on mast such as acorns, pecans, fruits and berries of all kinds, grass, broad-leaved plants, tree bark, and agricultural crops like corn. They then supplement these vegetables with animal matter such as fawns, feral hogs, carcasses of dead animals, grubs, frogs, snakes, armadillos, insects, small mammals, and even alligator eggs. The fact that parks throughout black bear range in North America have had to install "bear resistant"

(they're not bear proof) garbage cans is a testament to their diverse food habitats and ingenuity.

Bears reduce their metabolic rate, breathing, and core body temperature during hibernation. This period of inactivity evolved to get bears through a winter of low food resources. Sometimes individual bears in the Southwest may not hibernate at all, or may get up for a walk and a snack in the middle of winter because of our mild weather. In Big Bend National Park, bears were found to hibernate from the



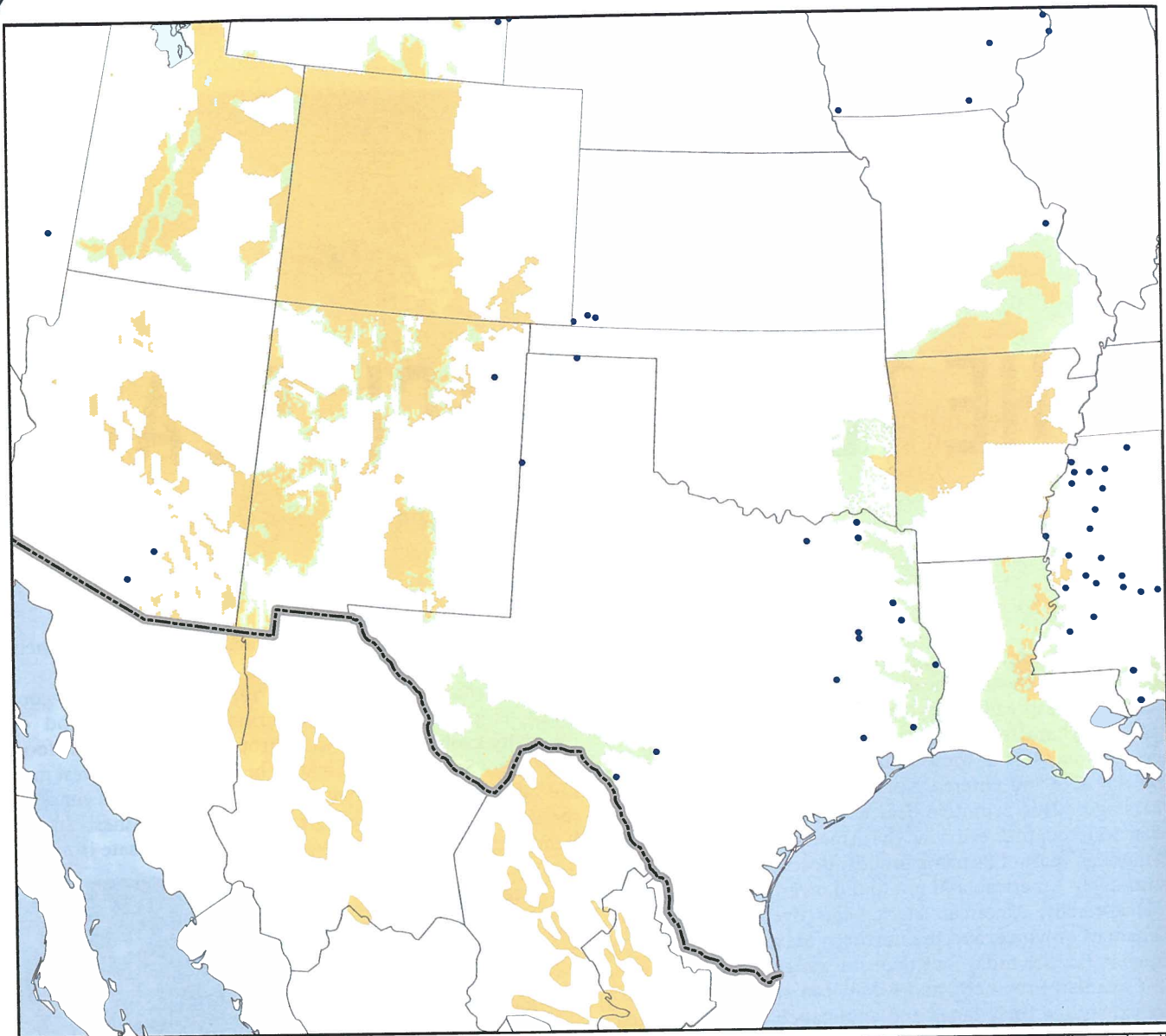
Photograph of famous bear hunter, Ben Lilly, reportedly sitting in ambush for a bear in the Big Thicket of East Texas, December 1906.



Photo courtesy of David Onorato

David Onorato and his colleagues had 15 black bears radio-collared in Big Bend NP to study movements when 13 of those bears moved to Mexico when food became scarce in the park.

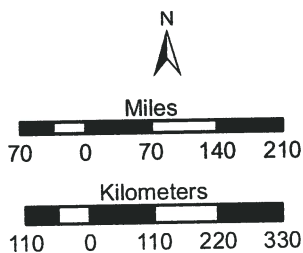




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end of December through April, mostly in secluded rocky outcroppings in steep canyon walls with a small south-facing entrance.

A pair (usually) of cubs about the size and weight of a can of Coke, are born in January and February when mom is sleeping in the den. The cubs then find a source of milk in the mountain of black fur and continue to nurse while mom goes back to sleep. They emerge with mom from the den

in April or May weighing 4-8 pounds.

Cubs stay with their mother for a year and a half. With this kind of time investment for raising cubs, that means females generally produce cubs every other year. Nutrition is an important driver of bear reproduction. In fact, after a drought year or failure of a mast crop, we see very few cubs born into the population that year. If females have 2 cubs every other year, and 50% of those cubs don't make it, that





Emory Peak from the Chisos Basin, Chisos Mountains, Big Bend National Park, March 2014.

means every female produces one yearling-aged bear every 2 years. This low reproductive rate is why it takes longer for bear populations to grow and expand in distribution.

The Black Bear in Texas

Texas always had black bears. In fact, they may have been widely distributed across much of the state. As was the unfortunate case with many large mammals, we altered their habitat dramatically and killed more than their populations could sustain, sometimes intentionally. Before we had laws to protect and manage our wildlife, we were pretty hard on the edible and predatory animals.

There were 2 notable strongholds in the state, East Texas and the Trans Pecos, where black bears persisted long enough for us to have some accounting in the written records and local lore.

East Texas

By 1850-1890, black bears had disappeared from East Texas except for the Big Thicket area. When the first organized survey of mammals in Texas was conducted in 1905, they did find black bears in East Texas, but only in scattered remnant populations. At the time there were no laws and no general push by the public to conserve native wildlife populations for the future that we see today. Over the next several decades, bears continued to dwindle with the last hold outs being found in the lower portion of Big Thicket. Apparently the last native Texas black bear was killed in Polk County in the late 1950s.

To bolster regional black bear populations, the state of Arkansas released 254 bears in the late 1950s and early 1960s from Minnesota and Manitoba, Canada. Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries followed suit with

the release of 161 more Minnesota bears from 1964-67. Following those releases, there was an increase in bear sightings in East Texas for a few years. In 1977, TPWD started to track credible sightings of black bears moving in from Louisiana and have since recorded reliable sightings in 24 locations with an increasing trend every decade.

Regardless of these translocation efforts, the black bear population in Louisiana was in trouble and in 1992 they were placed on the Endangered Species list as threatened. Genetic work showed some of the Louisiana subpopulations had evidence of Minnesota genes, but all bears in a large swath of Louisiana, Mississippi, southern Arkansas, and East Texas were included in the endangered designation. The recovery of bears in this area has been a success and in May 2015 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced the endangered Louisiana black bear had reached the goal of two populations totaling 500-750 bears and they proposed to “delist” it, or take it off the Endangered Species List.

Bears, mostly dispersing males, wander into Texas

This is the very subspecies of black bear that Theodore Roosevelt hunted in Mississippi in 1902, when after an unsuccessful few days of hunting, the guide trapped a bear and tied it up for Roosevelt to shoot. Teddy wanted nothing to do with shooting a bear that was not in fair chase and his refusal to shoot the bear became the subject of a political cartoon in the Washington Post. The story spread like wildfire and it led to a toy company marketing small stuffed bears they called “Teddy’s Bear” and so the famous toy was invented.



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across the Louisiana state line periodically and are seen or photographed on trail cameras. Despite the periodic visitors, there is no evidence currently of a breeding population of black bears in East Texas. If the Louisiana bear population continues to grow and expand after being delisted, it may start to recolonize the forests and swamps of East Texas once again. If that happens, and it is no longer considered an endangered species, it will still be protected by state law as "State Threatened" unless abundant enough to be managed as a game species. Being able to hunt an animal is not the goal of recovering them, but it is a byproduct of a successful restoration effort and something to be proud of.

West Texas

Black bears historically occurred in all forest and foothills habitat in Northern Mexico and in the mountains of West Texas. As in the east, the western black bears dwindled to isolated pockets in rugged habitat that provided food and protected them from unregulated harvest and control efforts. They were still common in the Chisos Mountains in the early 1940s, but reported to be not so common in 1944 when the Big Bend National Park was established. It was around that time that the records of bears in West Texas fade out.

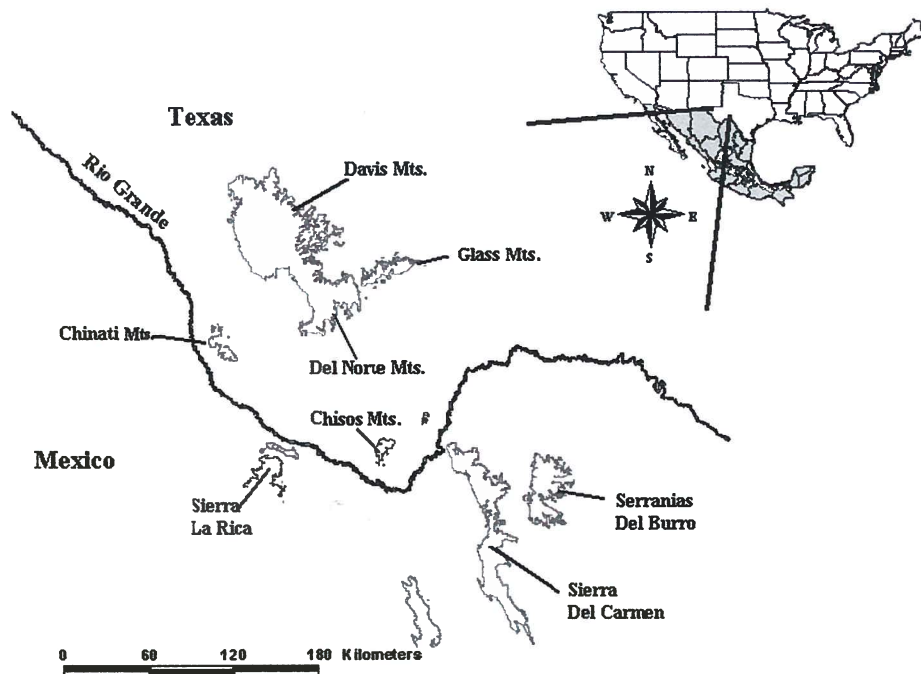
Male bears have a tendency to travel long distances across not-so-friendly terrain. Young males will disperse 20 miles or more from their mother to establish a home range of their own, but young females tend to homestead next to mom. Luckily, a bear showed up in Big Bend NP in 1984 and this began a natural recovery of the bear population in the Chisos Mountains in the middle of the park. Bears continued to move in from Serranias del Burros and Sierra del Carmen just south of the border in Coahuila, Mexico and, with some reproduction, we had a breeding population of bears in the Chisos by the mid 1990s. These two Mexican mountain ranges have robust populations of bears and serve as sources for smaller mountain ranges in the Big Bend area and northern Mexico. Genetic analysis of the bears in Big Bend NP indicated immigration was almost all males moving in and that all female bears may have come from a

single female that arrived in the 1980s.

This new population grew from a single breeding pair known in 1988 to 29 bears in 2000. Research was being conducted at the time to learn as much as possible about the return of the Texas black bear. By the fall of 2000, researchers had 15 bears radio collared to study their movements and collect basic information about how they used the landscape. Interestingly, the fall of 2000 was characterized by severe drought and probably a failure in the mast crop (acorns, juniper berries, etc) resulting in a mass exodus from the Chisos Mountains. Of the 15 radio collared bears, 13 left Texas and made a run for the border in search of concentrations of natural food in the mountains of Mexico. Three of those bears traveled 100 miles or more. In that single season of low food availability, the bear population in Big Bend NP was reduced to as few as 5-7 bears. A couple of these bears did return to the Chisos in the following years, emphasizing the need to maintain open travel corridors for these animals.

The Chisos Mountains and nearby Black Gap Wildlife Management Area are small islands of habitat that can hold a population of bears, but is not large enough to buffer them from periodic periods of food source scarcity. Although the Chisos are the largest block of bear habitat close to the border, there are other satellite parcels of suitable bear habitat to the north in West Texas. There have been black bears confirmed in recent years in the Chinati, Davis, Dead Horse, Glass, del Norte, and Guadalupe mountains. Outside of the Chisos and Dead Horse mountains and Black Gap WMA, bear sightings seem to be dispersing males with no lady friends to settle down with. These transient bears show up out of nowhere and then seem to disappear the same way. Jonah Evans, TPWD Mammalogist, confirmed bear tracks in the Davis Mountains a few years ago, but the bear who made them eventually disappeared.

The number of confirmed sightings of bears in West

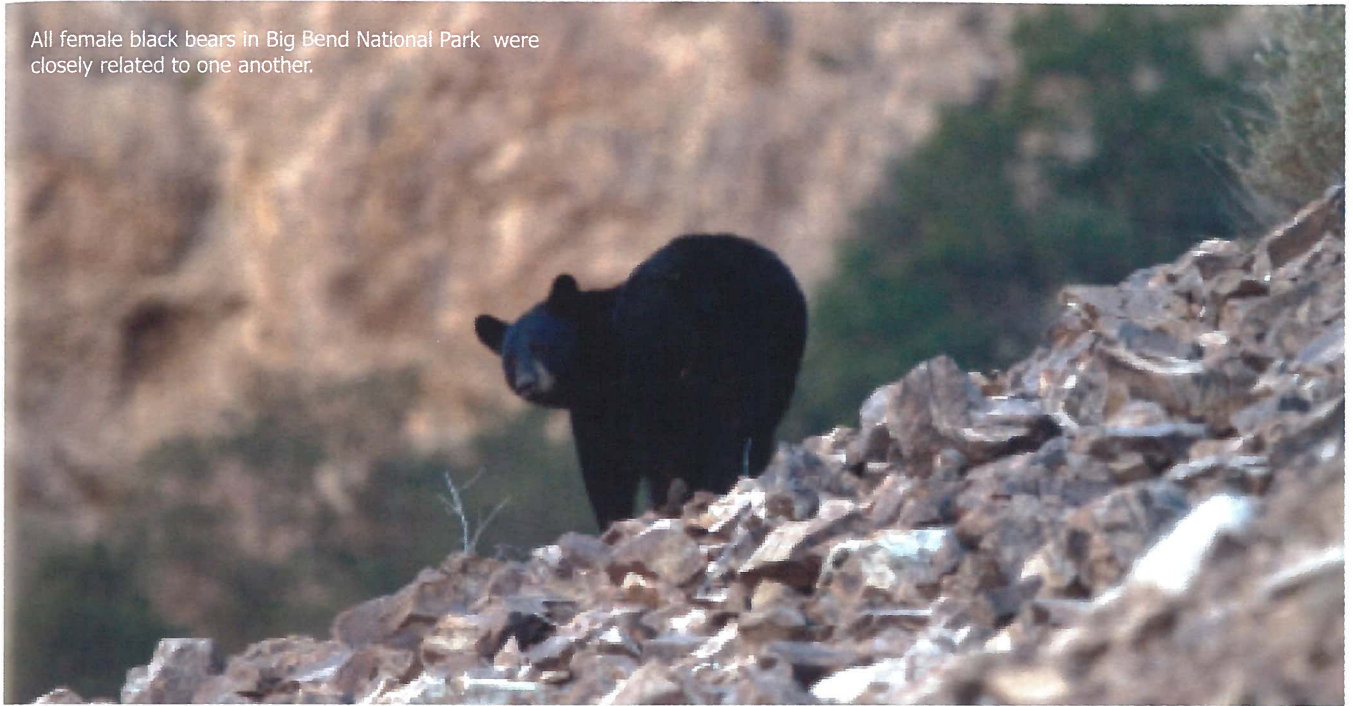


A FED BEAR IS A DEAD BEAR

If you suspect a bear is in your area, secure all food, birdseed, garbage, pet food, and other attractants. If a bear become habituated to an easy meal it often results in the bear having to be moved to unfamiliar habitat or euthanized.



All female black bears in Big Bend National Park were closely related to one another.



Texas has increased in most of the last decade, peaking in 2013 before falling quiet the last two years. According to Jonah Evans, the peak in 2013 was probably due to drought conditions causing bears to move more in search of food, which always puts them in more contact with humans with cell phones and cameras. When a bear shows up in these unusual places, it causes a stir. For example, in June of 2003 a 5-year old, 225 pound male black bear walked around the town of Alpine before being tranquilized by TPWD across from the Brewster County Courthouse and moved to more appropriate bear habitat. In the summer of 2009, another big black bear was struck and killed by a vehicle near a roadside park on Highway 90 just west of Alpine. Bears have used the Chisos as a stepping stone for excursions farther into the Trans Pecos and will probably continue to do so when times are right (or exceedingly bad, forcing them to move).

A genetic analysis of bears in the American Southwest and northern Mexico showed the close connection and interchange of bears between Mexico and the Trans Pecos. When those populations were compared to bears living in nearby Arizona/New Mexico, geneticists found a more distant relationship indicating much less movement between those areas.

Future of the Texas Bear

The black bear has been classified as endangered in all of Mexico since 1986 except the Serranias del Burro (36 miles south of Texas border) in northern Coahuila. The bears in that mountain range are designated as "Special Protection Status" because they are abundant and not in need of federal endangered status. Texas has prohibited bear hunting since 1983 and added the bear to the state list of endangered species in 1987, before downlisting them to threatened status in 1996.

In drought years, or after local failures of the mast crop, bears move more in search of an easier life. This results in a surge of bear sightings in unusual places such as the Hill Country, smaller mountains in West Texas, and even Starr County in the lower Rio Grande Valley. If we want bears back in Texas permanently we will need to protect, maintain, and manage wide open, rugged places for them to live. More importantly, they will need movement corridors between blocks of habitat to allow them to move to food sources when they need to. The key to a self-sustaining population of black bears in Texas is to manage the landscape so that female bears can freely move into blocks of suitable habitat from Louisiana and Mexico and stay.

Texans have not lived with bears in recent times and so this unfamiliarity brings with it distrust and concern, but bears are much easier to live with than most large mammals with pointed teeth and sharp claws. We

have a rich cultural heritage of conservation and should be able to make room for a few small pockets of bears in the state. Let's not rob the black bear of the privilege of being called a native Texan.

Editors note: Jim Heffelfinger completed a Masters Degree at Texas A&M-Kingsville and then worked on the Rio Paisano Ranch (Brooks/Kleberg Co.) as Manager of Wildlife Operations. He is now adjunct faculty at University of Arizona, Professional Member of the Boone & Crockett Club, Chair of the western states Mule Deer Working Group, and a game biologist for the Arizona Game & Fish Department.

See www.deernut.com to purchase his book "Deer of the Southwest" published by Texas A&M University Press or follow him on Twitter: @GameTrax or Facebook: Jackrabbit Jim. 🐾

IF YOU SEE SOMETHING, SAY SOMETHING

If you see a bear or bear sign, contact:
Texas Parks and Wildlife Department
1 (800) 792-1112