

# Black Bears on the Move in Texas

article and photo by Nathan Garner, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department Regional Wildlife Director, Tyler

In the dim, pre-dawn light it's hard to tell what that dark shape is under the corn feeder some 100 yards distant from your blind—most likely it's a feral hog stealing corn meant for deer. But put your rifle down and make positive identification; that hog-like shape could turn out to be a black bear.

A small resident and reproducing black bear population in Texas is slowly expanding its range. Always on the look-out for an easy meal, a bear might show up at your feeder this hunting season.

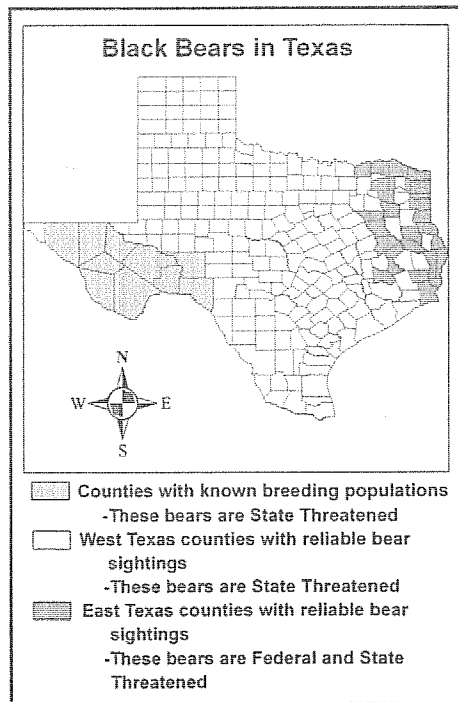
Black bears were just about gone from Texas by the end of World War II due to over hunting and habitat loss. They have been making a slow and natural return to Texas since 1984 when a black bear was observed in Big Bend National Park after nearly 50 years' absence.

A large portion of today's bear population resides in the vast Trans-Pecos Region of western Texas. A few wild and free-roaming individual bears have been observed in South Texas, the western edge of the Hill Country, the northwestern Panhandle and the forests of deep East Texas in recent years. They are considered to be primarily younger males moving hundreds of miles alone from their birth places in western Texas, northern Mexico or New Mexico, Oklahoma, Arkansas and Louisiana where black bears are more common.

Black bears are protected in Texas and listed as a state threatened species. In far eastern Texas black bears are listed as a federally threatened subspecies under the Endangered Species Act associated with the black bear population in adjacent Louisiana (*Ursus americanus luteolus*). Bear hunting of any kind has been prohibited statewide since 1983. (See state map)

The forests of eastern Texas are similar to other occupied black bear habitats in adjacent states. East Texas has approximately 12 million acres of forested private and public land, including four national forests and the Big Thicket National Preserve. It is considered to be one of the next places in Texas for the continued slow, natural return of black bears.

The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department has documented several reliable bear



sightings in recent years in eastern Texas. Some of the most recent sightings have been verified by photos from motion-sensitive cameras installed at deer feeders. Studies are in progress to better determine the distribution and occurrence of black bears in eastern Texas using the collection of hair samples for DNA analysis and the assessment of suitable forested habitats most likely to support bears.

The East Texas Black Bear Conservation and Management Plan adopted by TPWD in 2005 uses a partnership approach to facilitate the recovery of black bears in East Texas through cooperative efforts. One misconception about this plan was an early suggestion that TPWD should to stock bears. This never occurred and will not happen in the future unless there is overwhelming public and political support for it. And stocking may be unnecessary as bears continue to expand naturally into the forests of eastern Texas from adjoining states where there are growing, expanding or stable black bear populations.

Bears are still rare in Texas and very few Texans have ever seen one here. Black bears are also normally shy and not aggressive to humans. This makes it unlikely you or someone you know will encounter one.

Even so, never approach a bear. If you do happen to encounter one at close range, talk in a calm manner while backing away slowly. Do not make direct eye contact and do not run. If a bear approaches you, stand your ground and raise your arms, backpack or jacket to appear larger. If the bear continues to approach, yell at it to scare it off. If a bear is visiting your deer stand or campsite, scare it with rocks, a slingshot or an air horn.

**Hunters need to know their target: It is a violation of law to kill a black bear in Texas.**

Public opinion surveys of residents in several Texas counties have been recently conducted to determine their attitudes on bears. Survey results in many areas show general support for the return of black bears while also indicating a need for more easily available information on bears.

In an effort to get information on bears to interested Texans, you can receive the new "Bear Safety in Mind" brochure from TPWD by calling one of the following regional offices in your area: West Texas (Alpine—432-837-2051), Central Texas (Kerrville—830-896-2500), East Texas (Tyler—903-566-1626), North Texas (Canyon—806-655-3782), or South Texas (Pleasanton—830-569-8700). You can also learn more about black bears at the TPWD website: <http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/>

Please contact TPWD to report bear sightings in Texas using these same phone numbers. 🐻

