

Living with Black Bears in Texas

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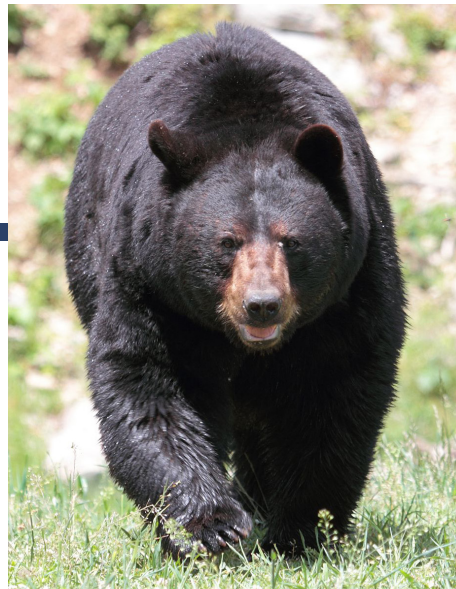


Photo by Cephas (CC BY-SA 3.0)

Throughout the United States, many people live close to black bears (*Ursus americanus*). Populations of these bears nationwide are recovering from historic harvest, and expanding to occupy their former range. Unlike brown bears (*Ursus arctos*), black bears are omnivorous creatures that rarely pose a threat to humans, pets, or livestock. Like any large mammal, however, humans must take steps to be aware and coexist with black bears. What follows is basic information on black bears in Texas, and how to minimize conflict with them. Being “Bear Aware” can help keep you safe and prevent the need for euthanizing human-habituated bears.

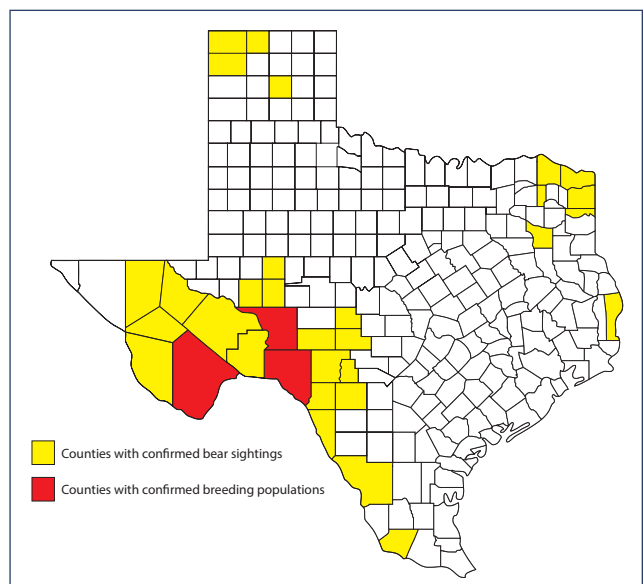
Bears in Texas?

Many Texans are surprised to hear that black bears live in or are returning to their area of the state. Currently, there are bears in the Big Bend area of the Trans Pecos, the western Hill Country, the Panhandle, and deep Northeast Texas. There is a steady movement back to historic range. Despite its name, the black bear’s coat can be jet black to cinnamon brown, depending on genetic selection in the local population.

Black bears are omnivorous—their diet is very like a raccoon’s. Up to 80 percent of their diet is plant matter, and they often scavenge the rest from carcasses of dead animals. In many circumstances,

they will hunt for insects and worms for the “meat based” part of their diet. They have been known to kill larger mammals and even livestock. This occurs mostly during late spring and early summer, when bears become active after hibernating, and juveniles “leave home.” This is when food requirements are high, and bears will find the most nutritious food they can. If there is a lack of fruits, berries, and other plant matter, they may feed on other animals.

Black bears are smaller than their brown relatives. A large male weighs 150 to 500 pounds, and females weigh 90 to 375 pounds.



Confirmed Texas black bear sightings 2000–2017.

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Black bears are protected in Texas—it is illegal to hunt, trap, kill, or otherwise take them. However, if a bear is a clear and present threat to human safety or property, it may be killed. When conflicts with bears arise, you should contact your local Texas Parks and Wildlife biologist (https://tpwd.texas.gov/landwater/land/technical_guidance/biologists/). They can help navigate legal options to address your bear-related problems.

Signs of black bears

If you suspect bears in your area, pay careful attention to signs such as, tracks, scat, and territorial markings on trees. Although you may not see the animal, the evidence of their presence is usually clear. Take pictures of suspected bear sign using a ruler or other standard item for scale and send them to your local biologist for interpretation.

Bear tracks stand out and are unlike any other you might encounter. Bears use their teeth and claws to mark trees or other surfaces to mark territory.



Territorial markings on tree.



Bear tracks.

Hunters, hikers, campers, and bears

Hunters must remember that areas where they leave game animal remains will attract bears. This carrion is an easy meal that bears will eagerly consume. No matter what time of year you hunt, it is possible you will encounter a bear. Although contact is minimal in the winter, due to hibernation, be aware of your surroundings, especially in remote locations that may contain dens with sleeping bears.

Bear-proofing wildlife feeding stations, such as deer feeders, can be difficult. Because hunters want game to have access to feed, but want to exclude black bears, the best options involve limiting access. Unless they are protected by an electric fence that deer can jump, gravity feeders should likely be removed in favor of spin-cast feeders. The base of spin-cast feeders should be at least 10 feet off the ground, and suspended from a cross-member that is least 4 feet from the post that supports it. Alternatively, hunters may electrify tripod spin-cast or gravity feeders, as well as providing electric fencing. Electric fencing may be permanent, similar to systems designed for livestock, or be portable, such as “back-country bear fencing” often used to secure camp sites. These portable systems are available from many outdoor companies. They are powered by D-cell batteries and use lightweight posts and wire. Whether suspending feed or electrifying, take care to prevent damage and the loss of feed.

Campers should collect trash nightly and hang it high enough from a tree or other structure that a bear cannot reach it, or climb to it. Ten feet off ground level and four feet from any branches is generally sufficient. Sweet-smelling items such as perfumes, insect repellants, and candy attract bears. The smell of camp cooking can also attract bears. It is wise to locate your cooking site 100 yards from your sleeping area. Even the smell of food on clothes can attract bears, so change clothes before sleeping if you cook for the camp. Coolers of food are easy targets for bears—keep them inside vehicles or otherwise inaccessible. Although some coolers are rated as bear-safe, black bears will still cause damage trying to get in them.

Hikers should be noisy in areas where black bears are present. A startled bear is a dangerous bear, and will have the same reaction as any animal when frightened. Although they might flee, they might also display defensive behaviors such as bluff charges or teeth clacking. This is especially possible for a female with cubs.

Bear-proofing around the house

Human-bear relations are most problematic around private homes. Bears, like raccoons, are opportunistic omnivores who enjoy human garbage. Homeowners should minimize exposing garbage to bears. A good first step is to secure trash cans with certified bear-proof covers. You can also contact your waste disposal company to request that they upgrade community dumpsters to be bear-proof. Next, minimize areas where you dump cooking grease, scraps, and reduce access to compost piles.

Other food sources include bird feeders and other wildlife feed, fallen fruit from trees, pet foods, and barbecue pits. Wood piles attract rodents, which can be a food source. Bears will quickly assess these sources come to them for food. If you choose to feed wildlife in “bear country,” move the feed frequently to prevent bears from becoming habituated to one area.

It may be surprising, but a closed door, high window, or low wall often will not deter bears. Livestock and pet feed stored in outbuildings are easy, high-energy sources of nutrition for black bears.



A black bear in a trash can. Photo by Florida Fish and Wildlife.

“Unwelcome mats” and other devices may be needed to secure houses, cabins, barns, or other buildings that contain bear attractants.

Managing damage from black bears

Although bears rarely damage property and kill livestock, they sometimes do. If you suspect a black bear has killed livestock, you must contact your local Texas Wildlife Services office to conduct a forensic investigation. You may also consult “Procedures for Evaluating Predation to Livestock and Wildlife,” published by the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service. This guide is authoritative and updated regularly.

Damage to killed livestock and wildlife is usually concentrated on the shoulder and back of the head, where a powerful bite will be mortal. A broken back, neck, and/or pelvis is common, as the bear holds down the animal before killing it. A lactating female may have her udders consumed, but otherwise be unharmed. When consuming meat, bears often peel the skin back as they feed. Because black bears consume carrion, it is critical to establish if the bear is responsible for livestock damage, or if it is scavenging a kill made by another animal.

If a professional biologist confirms a bear kill, trapping and removing the offending animal may be a solution. In the modern era, it is notable that confirmed livestock kills by black bears in Texas are extremely rare. In these rare cases, though, support from state wildlife agency personnel is essential.

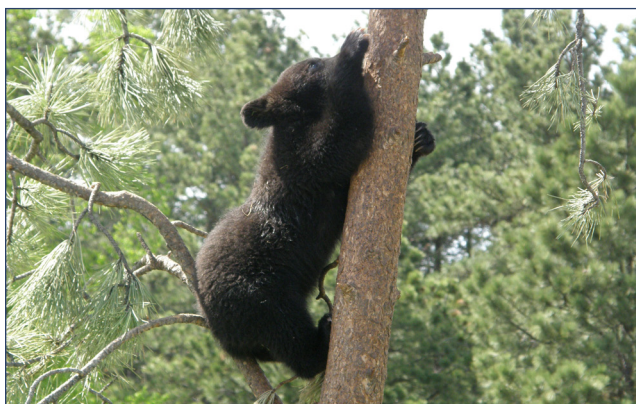
Occasionally, a black bear will damage something that cannot be relocated (plants, irrigation systems, apiaries, etc.) while in search of food, water, and shelter. In these instances, the simplest solution is often an electric fence—these that can be a highly effective for dissuading a bear. A 40-inch-tall fence with stays every 8 inches should be sufficient to deny a bear entry to an area. You should alternate “hot” and grounded wires beginning with the bottom as a hot wire. Place this fence 4 to 6 feet from the structure or feature you wish to protect. You will need to provide 5,000 to 6,000 volts to effectively shock a bear. This will require standard, household elec-

trical service, or a 12-volt automotive-style battery with a charging panel. The wire can be 12 gauge or larger, and barbed wire can be effective at penetrating thick fur to deliver a charge. Although some may be concerned that an electrified fence will be dangerous to pets, humans, and other wildlife, a properly maintained electric fence should not cause permanent damage or injury.

Conclusion

People living or visiting bear country should take all necessary steps to exclude bears from attractants such as livestock, wildlife, and pet food, as well as camp or household trash to prevent them from becoming nuisance animals. Black bears with access to attractants can easily become habituated to humans and structures and may eventually pose a safety risk.

Wildlife professionals have few tools for deterring habituated bears. These include excluding, hazing, and capturing. Exclusion is often the most effective tool for preventing bears from becoming a safety risk. However, this requires individuals liv-



Bear climbing a tree. Photo by Tim1357 (CC BY 2.0)

ing or visiting bear country to be proactive because bears are very strong and great problem solvers. Hazing can potentially teach a bear to avoid attractants if it has had limited encounters, but this tool becomes ineffective when a bear repeatedly accesses an attractant. Capturing bears for translocation to other areas is dangerous for the bear and the wildlife professionals involved, and bears frequently return to the capture area within a few weeks. Translocation to a zoo or other such facility is typically not an option, as most zoos do not have the resources to host additional bears. The can also be reluctant to accept bears with a history of risky behavior. Unfortunately, this means bears often must be euthanized if they aren't excluded from attractants before they become habituated.

If you encounter a bear...

Stay Calm! Do not panic, this worries bears.

Slowly back away. Do not run, this invokes a chase response.

Slowly raise your arms over your head, and pull a jacket or shirt up high to make yourself look larger.

Make sure you are not between a mother and her cubs, but if this happens, back away slowly to leave a clear path between them.

If you encounter a lone cub, do not try to approach or pick it up...the mother is likely nearby, watching for signs of trouble.

If a bear begins to clack its jaws towards you, this is a warning and sign of their feeling of danger—back away slowly and calmly.

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