

Black bears expanding across Maryland

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Black Bear population continues to grow and expand eastward in Maryland

MD DNR

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Black bear sightings expand across Maryland

Possibly for the first time in almost a hundred years a black bear has been seen in Carroll County. As reported on Wednesday May 26, 2010 in the Carroll County Times, a yearling bear was seen in the Union Mills and Westminster area.

History of Maryland Black Bears

When settlers arrived in Carroll County, black bears roamed statewide across Maryland. However by the late 1800s and early 1900s, the black bear population had dropped dramatically.

Settlers cleared the landscape for agriculture, industry, and timber production resulting in most of Maryland's suitable black bear habitat being lost. The fear of black bears by settlers encouraged their killing when a bear was encountered. This indiscriminate killing, combined with the large-scale habitat loss and a lack of conservation laws, eliminated black bears from most parts of the state.

According to MD DNR, by the mid-20th century, black bears could only be found in the rugged mountainous areas in western Maryland. By the mid 1950s, only a few bears were estimated to remain in the state. In 1953, the black bear hunting season was closed due to concerns of a dwindling bear population. In 1972, the status of black bears was changed from 'forest game animal' to 'endangered species' in Maryland.

Maryland Black bear facts

Bears are the largest mammal in Maryland. Adult bears usually weigh between 125 and 400 pounds, although bears weighing 600 pounds or more are not uncommon. Adult female black bears achieve a maximum weight of 150 to 300 pounds.

Bears are a wide-ranging animal. Adult females have an average home range of about 13 square miles, while adult males can cover 25 square miles or more. Young bears striking out on their own can travel 100-150 miles in search of new territory. These young travelers are most likely the ones spotted in late spring and early summer outside of the normally considered home range of Maryland black bears.

Bears are opportunistic feeders, which mean they will eat whatever is easily accessible. Largely vegetarian, common foods include berries, other fruits, acorns, beechnuts, hickory nuts, insects, roots, grasses, reptiles, amphibians, fish and carrion. As the opportunity arises, bears will also eat garbage, agricultural crops and bird food. Bears feed heavily during the fall months in order to increase fat reserves for the upcoming long winter.

In Maryland, there are no known cases of a human being attacked by a black bear.

Maryland black bear population status

Currently, MD DNR reports that in Maryland there is a breeding population of black bears in the four westernmost counties (Garrett, Allegany, Washington, and Frederick). The highest bear densities are found in Garrett and western Allegany Counties. However with the annual increase of bear sightings each spring throughout Frederick, Baltimore, Cecil, Harford and now Carroll Counties, it may not be long before this population zone is expanded.

The black bear was removed from the state "endangered species" list in 1980 and listed as a "nongame species of special concern". In 1985, the status of the black bear was once again changed from a nongame species to a forest game species.

Resulting from the increased health and growth of forests in the western Maryland and the conservation measures taken throughout the mid-Appalachian region, the western Maryland landscape is now home to a healthy, thriving black bear population. MD DNR research and population monitoring have shown an increasing trend in the black bear population since the 1980s.

A 1991 population study estimated 79 bears in Garrett County. In 2000, MD DNR conducted another population study that estimated 227 adult and subadult bears in Garrett and western Allegany counties.

By 2005 population estimates conducted across Garrett and Allegany counties, yielded an estimated population of 326 adult and subadult black bears in the same area. MD DNR is preparing to conduct another intense population study, and place the current Maryland black bear population around 600 bears. On a side note - spend anytime in western Maryland and the locals will claim the bear population to be much higher than MD DNR's estimates. However I have discussed this with Harry Spiker, MD DNR's bear biologist, and he strongly believes in their methods in studying and estimating the bear population.

What should I do if I encounter a bear? (taken from MD DNR bear fact sheet)

- If you encounter a bear that is not aware of your presence, back away and leave the area. Give the bear plenty of room. If you spot a bear cub, remain alert. The cub's mother is sure to be near. Again, back away and leave the area.
- Should you encounter a bear at close range, speak to the bear in a calm, assertive voice. STAY CALM and don't run. Remain upright and back away from the bear. Avoid direct eye contact, as the bear may perceive this as a threat. Again, give the bear plenty of room. Don't crowd the bear's personal space.
- Black bears may exhibit some unique behaviors when they feel their personal space is being threatened. A crowded bear may huff or make a woofing noise at the threat. They may also swat the ground, pop their jaws, or even bluff charge the perceived threat. When a bear bluff charges, it may stop several yards or just a few feet short of the threat. Remember not to run. Stay calm. Remain upright and back away from the bear.
- Bears may also stand upright on their hind legs. This is not a sign of aggression. Bears usually stand upright when they are trying to get a better look at something. Bears rely heavily on their sense of smell, and may stand upright to better determine the source of a new scent.
- It is important to remember that black bear attacks are extremely rare. In Maryland, there are no known cases of a human being attacked by a black bear. By using common sense and good judgment, we can continue to appreciate the natural beauty of these forest animals at a safe distance.

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