

BLACK BEAR STATUS IN IOWA 2001 to Present

Black bears were one of the most recognizable and noticeable mammals encountered by Europeans as they settled North America. As settlers moved west, they generally killed any bears they encountered. Thus, black bear numbers declined rapidly in many areas and disappeared from much of their former range. Most present-day Iowans probably associate black bears with some of our large national parks and do not realize they once occurred in Iowa. When the settlers reached Iowa, they found them widespread throughout the state but higher numbers occurred where there were more woodlands. Bears were killed because they would damage crops, harass and kill livestock, and because they were valuable both as food and for their hides. Several black bear stories of the exploits of early-day "Davy Crocketts" in Iowa have been recorded in journals and diaries.

There are pre-1900 records of black bears from 48 Iowa counties, two-thirds of them from counties in the eastern half of Iowa. The last recorded historical bear sighting in the 1800s was one killed near Spirit Lake in 1876. Although a Fish Commission had been established in 1873 nothing really happened in terms of Game/Wildlife legislation until after the last black bear had disappeared. Thus they are not recognized as a designated wildlife species in the Iowa Code. In the 1960s, black bear reports began to occur in the state. Several of these reports were from captive bears that were either turned loose or were escapees. In the 1990s through the present, we began to field more reports of what appeared to be wild free ranging black bears in the state.

Currently, the nearest established wild populations of black bears are in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and southern Missouri. These populations are expanding their range towards Iowa from both the north and south. Figure 1 shows the most recent sightings of bears in Iowa. Many of those confirmed reports are occurring in northeast/eastern Iowa. During 2002 alone, there were at least 5 different fairly reliable black bear sightings. In 2003 and 2004, no reliable sightings were reported. However during the spring and summer of 2005, the Iowa DNR received its first modern day black bear depredation complaint. In Allamakee County, a black bear reportedly was marauding several beehives in a few scattered locations foraging on both the bees and the honey. In 2008, a surge of 5 black bear sightings occurred, 1 in each of the following counties: Davis, Johnson, Winneshiek, as well as one shot in both Franklin and Fremont counties a week apart. Although not validated, the circumstantial evidence seems to indicate the one shot in Franklin County may have been and escaped or released bear while the one in Fremont County appears to be wild as it had been seen in Missouri, just days before it was killed just across the border from where it was last seen in Missouri.

In July (2009), a male black bear entered the northeast part of the state and paralleled the eastern Iowa border south before crossing the Mississippi returning to Wisconsin. This bear crossed the Mississippi River near Harpers Ferry in Allamakee County moved westward then south and basically paralleled the river southward to near Clinton. Then it crossed the Mississippi River near Green Island, Iowa back into Wisconsin then northward to Baraboo, Wisconsin where

it became impossible to keep track of it because it had no specific markings.

During May of 2010, there was a reliable report of an adult black bear and a yearling spotted just west of Marquette, IA (Clayton County) feeding at bird feeders. In late May, 2010, a smaller bear, probably a yearling, was witnessed in northwest Mitchell County near Carpenter, IA. In early June, a bear was seen north of Northwood (Worth County) near the Iowa/Minnesota border. Observations of this bear have also reported in southern Minnesota. It would seem unlikely that this bear was the same one reported near Marquette as it was not reported at any point between and in Iowa that would be unusual as there is so much open territory to see the bear. All indications are that these are wild, free ranging bears, not bears released or escaped from captivity.

In October 2010 a black bear was sighted in and around the Yellow River Forest in Allamakee County. This prompted the Iowa Department of Natural Resources to issue a warning for people to avoid the animal at that time. This bear is likely a young male that moved into Iowa from southern Wisconsin where there is a healthy wild bear population.

In September 2011, a black bear was sighted in Winneshiek County. Again, this is likely to be a wandering bear from southeast Minnesota or southwest Wisconsin. A few unconfirmed reports came from Mitchell County along the upper Cedar River as well.

In May through June 2012, a black bear was sighted multiple times in northeast Iowa. From field reports, it seemed to make a loop through the following

counties: Winneshiek, Fayette, Chickasaw, Mitchell, Howard, and back to Winneshiek where it was last seen moving in a northerly direction. No further confirmed reports came to us after that possibly indicating it moved back into southeast Minnesota. Further reports of black bear sightings occurred there through the summer 2012.

In 2013, there were no confirmed reports of black bears in Iowa.

So far in 2014, there have been at least 3 separate reports of black bears in Iowa. One in Winneshiek/Allamakee counties, one in Fayette/Clayton counties, and one in Ringgold county. The bear seen in the Fayette/Clayton county area was reported to have two cubs with it, but the DNR hasn't been able to confirm this yet. This bear(s) is has also raided beehives causing extensive damage to the bee owner's hives.

Black bear sightings are usually more reliable than mountain lion/cougar sightings because they do not necessarily flee when sighted, also bear tracks are very distinct, and they are not readily mistaken for other animals. Black bears, like mountain lions/cougars, have no legal status in Iowa. That means they aren't protected. The DNR continues to consider legislation to give both species legal furbearer status in the Iowa Code. The Governor's office has discouraged the DNR from pursuing legal status of the black bear and mountain lion/cougar because of bio-political conflicts between agriculture and these 2 wildlife species.

Proposed legislation was introduced for designation status for the black bear, but it did not get debated during the 2006 and 2007 legislative sessions. However

the public outcry over the 2 black bears shot in mid 2008 point out that much of the public is in favor of some type of legal black bear status. The effort to give them furbearer status needs to be pursued in the future. This would allow appropriate wildlife management to occur which would include opportunities to handle nuisance black bear complaints.

Regardless of legislation, development of a more uniform and standard policy concerning bear sightings in Iowa may be warranted. A lot of emotion is generated when one of these bears are killed. Where possible we should discourage the indiscriminant killing of black bears unless there are concerns for human, pets, or livestock safety. Bears are omnivores, primarily vegetarians, foraging on seeds, fruits, berries and other plant material but given the hunger and need they will feed upon animals as well. Human tolerance will be the deciding factor as to whether black bears could ever re-established again in Iowa. If they do, their numbers would likely remain quite small.

Most historical information in this report is from Dr. James J. Dinsmore's book "A County So Full of Game—The Story of Wildlife in Iowa".