

BLACK BEAR STATUS IN IOWA

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, bear numbers declined rapidly in many areas, and bears 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 that 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 and harass and kill livestock and because they were valuable both as food and for their hides. Several 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 forty-eight Iowa counties, two-thirds of them from counties in the eastern half of Iowa. The last recorded bear in the 1800s was one found near Spirit Lake in 1876. In the 1960s, black bear reports begin to reoccur in the state. Several of these reports were from captive bears that were either turned loose or were escapees. In the 1990s thru the present, we began to field more reports of what appeared to be wild free ranging 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 18.1 shows the most recent sightings of bears in Iowa. During 2002, there were at least 5 different fairly reliable Black Bear sightings. Thus far in 2003, no reliable sightings have been reported. Black bear sightings are usually more reliable than Mt. Lion sightings because they do not necessarily flee when sighted, the tracks are very distinct, and they are not readily mistaken for other animals.

Much of the historical information in this report was paraphrased from Dr. James J. Dinsmore’s book “A Country So Full Of Game—The Story Of Wildlife in Iowa”.



Figure 18.1. Sightings and evidence of Black bear in Iowa.

