

Black Bears in the Upper Midwest and Iowa

Historical Upper Midwest Status

Prior to European settlement black bears (*Ursus americanus*) were widespread in the region with the highest densities found in wooded areas. During colonization bears were killed because they damaged crops, harassed and killed livestock, and were valuable both as food and for their hides. The population was decimated by the late 1800s with bears remaining only in the most remote wooded areas. In Iowa, bears were originally documented in 48 counties (mostly eastern Iowa) pre-1900, but the last historical documentation was a bear shot near Spirit Lake in 1876. Regulation of harvest in the 20th century fostered viable populations in several states bordering Iowa including Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Missouri.

Minnesota Population

In 1965 the bounty for black bears was removed and in 1971 bears were protected as a big game species with a reduced harvest season from 52 to 6 weeks. These protections allowed the bear population to recover from approximately 6,000 in 1970 to over 12,000 today. They are found mainly in the northern third of Minnesota, but range as far south as the interface between the forest and agricultural zones, where they utilize corn and other crops for subsistence. The population is managed by providing quality bear habitat, conducting research to increase knowledge of bear biology, educating the public on how to live with bears, assisting people with bear problems, and controlling the bear population with hunting seasons. Minnesota hunters harvest an average of 2,000 - 3,000 black bears annually and bear hunting license sales are tailored to achieve a desired harvest and population.

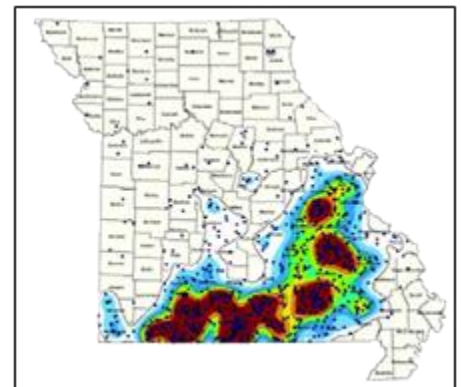


Wisconsin Population

The history and status of black bears in Wisconsin is similar to that in Minnesota. The population was approximately 6,000 in 1980 and limited to remote northern areas, but with reduced harvest through legal protection, suitable habitat, and management informed by research the population is currently thriving at nearly 25,000 bears. Their range is primarily in the northern third of the state, however bears are increasingly common in the lower two thirds. The population is managed through hunting with a quota/permit issuance system that ensures sustainable harvest and a quality hunting experience. Harvest permits are competitive with up to a 9 year wait depending on the zone. When finally drawn, the success rate is 40% and some of the largest bears in the country are taken; up to 600 or 700 lbs!

Missouri Population

Black bears were nearly extirpated by the 1900s and only a small population remained in the Ozark Mountains of southern Missouri. Observations of bears increased following reintroduction efforts in Arkansas in the 1950s and recent DNA analysis indicates these reintroduced Arkansas bears supplemented Missouri's population. Observations and nuisance complaints have increased over the past 10-15 years. The population growth rate is estimated to be 7-9% annually. There are now approximately 800 bears which occur primarily south of the Missouri river, however dispersing animals have traveled north to the Iowa border. State and federal agencies are working to encourage population expansion into compatible habitats while minimizing conflicts with humans.



Iowa Population?

Iowa does not have a breeding population of black bears and those occurring in Iowa are likely dispersing animals from the established populations in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Missouri, which are expanding toward Iowa from the north and south. Reports of free-ranging wild bears began in the 1990s and have steadily increased; 2-7 different bears have been reported annually for the past 5 years. Sightings are most common in northeast/eastern Iowa.

Black bears do not have any harvest regulations in Iowa because they are not a recognized wildlife species under the Iowa code, likely due their historic removal from the landscape prior to the enactment of wildlife regulations. Given the increasing frequency of sightings and nearby expanding populations, the Iowa DNR has proposed legislation in the past that would give black bears furbearer status in the Iowa Code and allow for regulation of harvest and nuisance complaints using sound wildlife management principles. These efforts have been curtailed by bio-political conflicts between agriculture and this species, however public outcry over 2 bears shot back in 2008 indicate there is public favor for some type of legal black bear status.

Regardless of legislation, development of a standard policy concerning bear sightings in Iowa may be warranted. Much emotion is generated when one of these bears is killed and we should discourage the indiscriminate killing of black bears unless there are concerns for human, pet, 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 ever re-establish a breeding population in Iowa. If they do, their numbers would likely remain quite small.

Information gathered from:

- [Bear management | Minnesota DNR](#)
- [Black bear management | Wisconsin DNR](#)
- [Bear | Missouri Department of Conservation](#)