

Outdoors

Black bears in Texas

Welcome back

Texas Parks & Wildlife magazine recently reported that black bears appear to be re-colonizing the Piney Woods of East Texas. That's interesting news because the patriarch of the Colorado County deer camp in which I grew up told us many a campfire tale of hunting bears in the Big Thicket during the 1890s.

I'm old enough to remember when the "last Texas bear" was shot on the grounds of the Polk County courthouse in Livingston about 50 years ago.

Scattered incidents of wet-back bears crossing the Rio Grande from Mexico in the Big Bend region have occurred since, but Texas could not claim a bear population during my 79-year lifetime.

Now, TP&W biologists believe that bears are crossing the Sabine River from Louisiana, and, just like the original pioneers, becoming naturalized Texans.

A little background: the American black bear was once the most widespread large mammal in North America, with populations in every state (including Texas) and Canadian province, and most of Mexico. With the whitetail deer and coyote, it is also one of the most adaptable. This is partly because bears are omnivores like raccoons, eating almost anything organic, animal or vegetable. Yes, they are opportunistic meat-eating predators, but I've seen black bears just out of hibernation up north grazing like cattle on fresh green grass.

They are also very intelligent, bold and powerful, which means that they can become nuisances around camps and isolated houses, able to break in, almost regardless of security measures, and wreak havoc with kitchen supplies. They love canned goods, sugar, syrup, lard, bakery goods and fresh vegetables, and are famous for raiding garbage dumps and trash cans.

Black bears are capable of killing livestock and game animals the size of deer, but are rarely guilty of such crimes.

Attacks on humans are uncommon, but not, unfortunately, unheard-of. In fact, most human injuries or deaths caused by wild bears in North America involve



Photo by John Wootters

Black bears may appear clumsy, but appearances are deceiving. They climb like scared cats and can run for hours ahead of a pack of hounds in steep, rough country. They're powerful, amazingly fast and quick on their feet, and dangerous fighters when brought to bay by dogs on the ground.

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blacks, not grizzlies. Of course, black bears are much more plentiful and widely distributed, and have far more contact with people than grizzly bears have. Nevertheless, these big, powerful animals can be rather prickly neighbors if they become too familiar. A wild bear, no matter how friendly it may seem, is unpredictable and simply cannot ever be trusted.

Many visitors to Yellowstone National Park ignored this advice during the '80s and insisted on feeding the plentiful black bears, resulting in so many serious injuries (to the people) that park personnel finally had to reduce the bear population dramatically. The bears had to pay with their lives for the stupidity of the humans.

Black bears in Texas will offer excellent sport for hunters and an interesting new target for wildlife watchers and photographers. In my opinion, large predators need to be hunted to instill in them a healthy fear of humans.

It was not until the animal-rights loonies in California outlawed the hunting of mountain lions in that state that lion attacks on people began to occur with some frequency. That was perfectly predictable, but now the dogooders are weeping and wailing, refusing to recognize their own portion of responsibility for the human deaths and injuries.

Black bears are natural clowns, and their antics are highly entertaining. Small cubs are delightful little live teddy bears, but mama bears are ominously protective, so cub-watching is best done from a distance.

Because bears sometimes seem big, bumbling clowns, inexperienced bear hunters can underestimate the speed

with which they can move and the keenness of their senses. Their eyesight is not great, but it's not bad, either, and their senses of smell and, especially, hearing, just may be the best of any North American wild animal. The Indians had a saying: When a feather falls in the forest, the eagle sees it, the wolf smells it ... and the bear hears it.

Bears are native to Texas, belong here, and have been absent for too many generations, so I welcome them back ... even if I have to buy a new, bear-proof garbage can.

John Wootters is a semi-retired outdoors writer with more than 30 years experience. He was editor of Petersen's Hunting magazine and author of the monthly column "Buck Sense" and has written the all-time best selling book on deer hunting, "Hunting Trophy Deer." He has served on the Board of Directors of the National Rifle Association, and written for Shooting Times, Rifle, Handloader, Guns & Ammo and Petersen's Hunting magazines.