



Defenders of Wildlife

- Home
- About Us
- Newsroom
- Support Us
- Programs & Policy
- Wildlife & Habitat
- Take Action
- Resources

Home > Newsroom > Defenders Magazine > Summer 2006

Email Print Share

Newsroom

Defenders Magazine

- Summer 2009
- Spring 2009
- Winter 2009
- Fall 2008
- Summer 2008

Defenders Magazine

- [Advertising](#)
- [Write the Editor](#)
- [Submission Guidelines](#)

Get Defenders Headlines

Get the latest wildlife conservation news and information... right when we post it online.



- [See all available feeds >](#)
- [What's RSS? >](#)

Defenders Magazine

Summer 2006

Teddy's Bears on the Rise

With some help from their friends, Louisiana black bears are moving up in the world.

By Wendee Holtcamp

Hovering on ropes 60 feet above the ground, biologist Brandon Wear peers in a cavity of an ancient cypress. He and a crew of biologists, waiting below, have slogged through palmetto thickets, blackberry



© C.C. Lockwood/clockwood.com (captive)

brambles, mud and thigh-high water to get to this bottomland hardwood forest in northeast Louisiana's Tensas River National Wildlife Refuge. They've come to perform an unnatural feat: extricate a sleeping Louisiana black bear and her cubs from a treetop den.

At least, she was supposed to be asleep. As Wear peers in the den, the mother bear huffs and swats at him. Like their cousins in the North, black bears in the South enter a winter torpor during which their bodily functions slow down. Some nest in tree cavities high off the forest floor, while others cozy up in ground dens. Torpid bears usually remain docile, but this winter has been unseasonably warm, and this momma bear seems wide awake.



Prairie Dogs

Defenders in Your World

Choose an animal or habit

Choose a state or region

GET DEFENDERS MAGAZINE

Enjoy *Defenders Magazine* for free when you donate.



SIGN UP NOW >

RELATED ARTICLES

Defenders Magazine Articles

- [Defenders in Action: Judge Rules in Favor of Defenders Efforts to Protect the Florida Black Bear](#) (Winter 2002)
- [Magazine home >>](#)

WILDLIFEeNEWS

Enter Your Email

SIGNUP >

Cautious but undeterred, the biologist pokes the bear in the shoulder with a jabstick full of sedatives, then swings away. Forty minutes later, the mother bear finally out cold, Wear clambers into the den, pulls the two cubs out and sends them down carefully in a duffel bag. Next, he straps a harness around the mother, and the crew below heaves on ropes to haul her out of the den and lower her to the ground.

"I'm really nervous before I start to climb," says Wear, a Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries biologist. "When I'm getting ready, I think of a million things that could go wrong. By the time I get to the den, I'm usually so focused on what the bear might do that I'm not thinking about anything else."

Wear and the bear crew devote one week each year to moving bears from northern Louisiana farther south in hopes of expanding the population. This effort is just one facet of a larger project to restore the Louisiana black bear--a threatened creature with a unique place in American history--to its rightful role in the ecology of the South. With an array of supportive collaborators--farmers, timber companies, conservationists, government agencies and academics--the project appears to be well on its way.

The Louisiana black bear is a subspecies of the American black bear, distinguished from its northern cousins primarily by its longer, narrower skull. This creature once roamed bottomland hardwood forests of eastern Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi and southern Arkansas,

Defending Black Bears

One key to keeping black bears alive in Louisiana and elsewhere is to help prevent conflicts between people and the bruins. Defenders of Wildlife works in Florida and California to educate people about how to coexist with bears.

This includes promoting the use of bear-proof garbage enclosures, distributing information on preventing encounters while enjoying the outdoors, and sharing tips with residents on bear-proofing their property. Defenders is also focusing on children in Florida with the "Kids for Cubs" program in local schools and a Florida black bear curriculum sponsored by the Disney Wildlife Conservation Fund.

Defenders also works directly on measures to keep bears out of trouble. We have helped to purchase and install bear-resistant dumpsters and garbage cans in both Florida and California. Defenders even provided financial support to a

[See latest eNews >](#)

[Privacy Policy >](#)

feeding mostly on nuts and berries. Historical records indicate the creatures were once abundant, says Paul Davidson, executive director of the Black Bear Conservation Committee (BBCC), a nonprofit group based in Baton Rouge. Native Americans, explorers and early settlers hunted them for food, fur and oil.

As exploitation of the bears increased and bottomland hardwood forests dwindled, Louisiana black bears began to decline. By the turn of the 20th century, most were gone. In 1902, one of the remaining bears had a fateful encounter with a U.S. president. After an unsuccessful hunting expedition in Mississippi, Theodore Roosevelt refused to shoot a Louisiana black bear that others had captured and tied to a tree. A cartoonist drew a caricature of the incident in a newspaper, with 'Teddy's Bear' represented as a fuzzy stuffed creature, and teddy bears were born.

The incident was a boon to makers of stuffed toy animals, but did little to benefit Louisiana black bears; populations stayed low through the ensuing decades. Bears were gone from Texas by the 1940s, and Louisiana remained the animal's final stronghold. By 1990, when the federal government proposed to add the Louisiana black bear to the threatened species list, biologists estimated that only 300 remained.

The proposed listing occurred at the height of the controversy over spotted owls in the Pacific Northwest, a battle that pitted loggers against conservationists. "The genuine fear was that this was going to be another spotted owl," says Davidson. With 90 percent of the bear's range in private ownership, restoring the bear hinged on support from private landowners. And some of these landowners didn't want to see the bear listed at all.

To avoid the acrimony associated with the spotted owl listing,

beekeeper in Florida to replace solar batteries in electric fencing around the apiary, keeping hungry bears at bay.

In California, Defenders of Wildlife belongs to the Tahoe Council for Wild Bears. In addition to its strong community-education campaign, the council works with local governments to establish and enforce ordinances related to properly storing garbage.

By educating and involving residents and visitors in bear country, we can protect both wildlife and people.

representatives from the timber industry, farmers, conservationists, government officials, researchers and others came together to form the BBCC. Rather than beating one another over the head with rhetoric, the members agreed to leave their "organizational 2x4 at the door," recalls Davidson.

The group hammered out a set of proposals that formed the basis of the official Louisiana black bear recovery plan adopted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The recovery plan has three main goals: two healthy subpopulations, one in the Tensas River basin and the other in the Atchafalaya River basin in east-central Louisiana; a forested corridor running north-south through the state connecting the two populations; and 15 years of research showing the bears can survive without protection.

One of BBCC's first obstacles was determining how to reforest a corridor for bears on mostly private lands. "We're talking about restoring one million acres," says Davidson. "You're not going to get that without the cooperation of a lot of people." The solution: tying into the 1990 Farm Bill's Wetland Reserve Program, which pays landowners to permanently reforest marginal cropland. Reforestation creates prime habitat not only for bears but also for migratory birds and the recently rediscovered ivory-billed woodpecker. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service also worked with timber companies to ensure permanent protection of old-growth cypress and tupelo trees for bear dens.

The recovery plan did not initially envision moving bears, but since no bears lived in the Atchafalaya River basin, biologists started relocating bears there in 2001. "The reason this project is so important is that females disperse so gradually," says Maria Davidson, Paul's wife and a biologist with Louisiana's Department of Wildlife and Fisheries. "We have areas around Tensas where densities are very, very high, and we have other areas where habitat is suitable but has no bears. If you move females there, you create a new subpopulation, and the remaining population can have a little elbow room." Biologists have now moved nearly 100 bears.

Relocating bears is not without risks. During the week biologists moved bears in March, two cubs died. Several weeks later, one of the relocated mother bears hightailed it across the state, likely abandoning her cubs. "There is a lot that can potentially go wrong on a project like this, but up to this year we had been extremely lucky," says Paul Davidson.

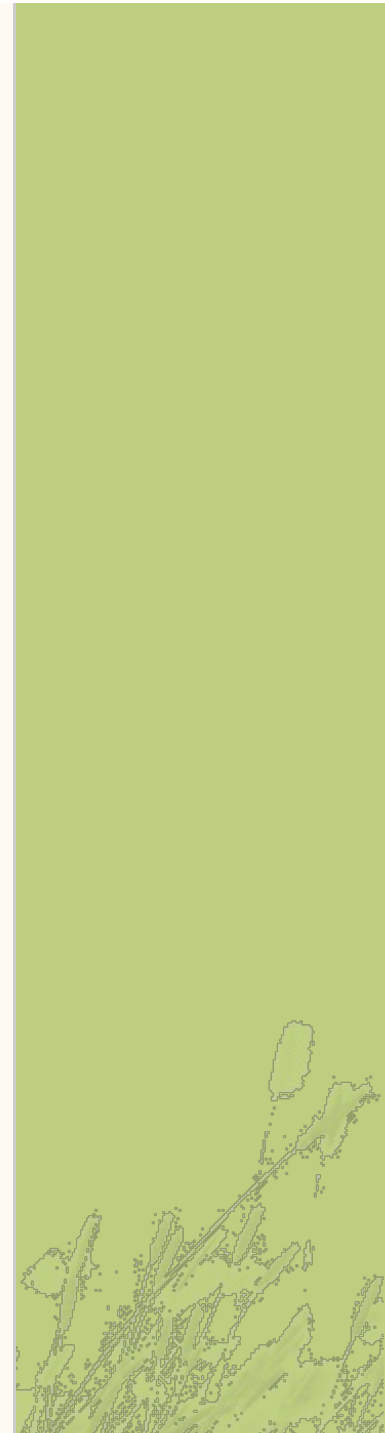
Overall, the news for Louisiana black bears is positive: More than 1 million acres of bear habitat have been permanently reforested in their native range, the Louisiana public now strongly supports bear recovery, and although there are no official population estimates, anecdotal evidence suggests bear numbers have increased substantially since the listing. Bears have even started spilling over into East Texas and Mississippi.

Texas officials have broached the possibility of starting a bear relocation project, but a decision to move ahead will depend on public support, say state wildlife officials. In a recent survey, 65 percent of respondents supported possible reintroduction in East Texas, but some survey comments indicated lingering misinformation and fear: 'To my knowledge, they are prone to attack'; 'I would always feel unsafe walking or doing any outside activities with my family'; 'I kill wild animals that kill my chickens'.

In reality, chicken feed interests Louisiana black bears more than chickens. At BBCC headquarters, Paul Davidson regularly fields calls about nuisance bears, and he relates a story from a few years back. "A guy called and said, 'there's a bear on my porch with his head in a pen I have some baby chicks in. He's eating the feed.' I asked him, 'Is he hurting the chicks?' The guy said, 'No, the chicks are standing on his feet.'"

Although no instances of livestock predation by Louisiana black bears have been recorded, black bear attacks on humans do occur, although they are rare. "I can't go in with good conscience and say that no one is ever going to be hurt by a bear," says Nathan Garner, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department bear biologist. "We will have to work to prevent nuisance bears, keep them out of garbage, and have a plan for how to deal with these issues when they arise."

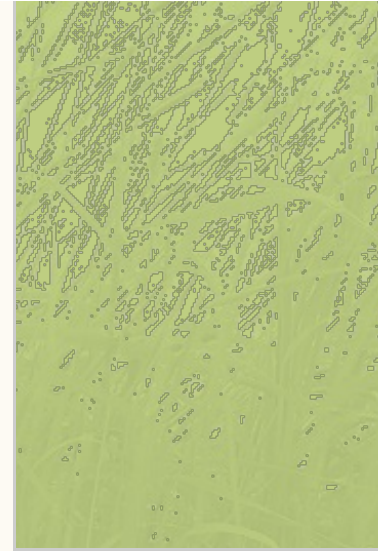
The sedated momma bear in Texas refuge poses no threat to anyone at the moment, however. The biologists take samples of her blood, adjust her radio collar and place her in a large metal cage on the back of a pickup truck. They drive her and the cubs 90 miles south to Three Rivers Wildlife Management Area, part of the Atchafalaya River basin, and park in a thicket near the river bank. Several men haul the bear out of the truck and place her in a den box where she and her cubs will rest until they emerge in a few weeks. "The most important part of this is the cub," says Walter Cotton, a federal wildlife biologist on the crew. Moving



adult bears with young cubs greatly increases the chances they stay put, rather than wandering back to their old range.

These cubs are members of a new generation of Louisiana black bears that will be able to roam freely from one end of the state to the other--and perhaps beyond. Being part of that legacy is something that clearly pleases those involved in the bear restoration effort. Says Cotton, "The neat thing about this project is that in 30 years when people are talking about how bears were restored in Louisiana--and possibly in neighboring states--I'll be able to tell my grandchildren, 'I was part of that.'"

Houston-based writer Wendee Holtcamp spent a week in northeast Louisiana in March witnessing bear relocation efforts.



- PROGRAMS & POLICY
- Wildlife Conservation
- Habitat Conservation
- International Conservation
- Science & Economics
- In the Courts
- Policy & Legislation
- Biodiversity Partners
- Kids Planet

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Jobs](#)

Get Connected:      

© Copyright 2010 Defenders of Wildlife
1130 17th Street NW | Washington, DC
20036
1-800-385-9712

