

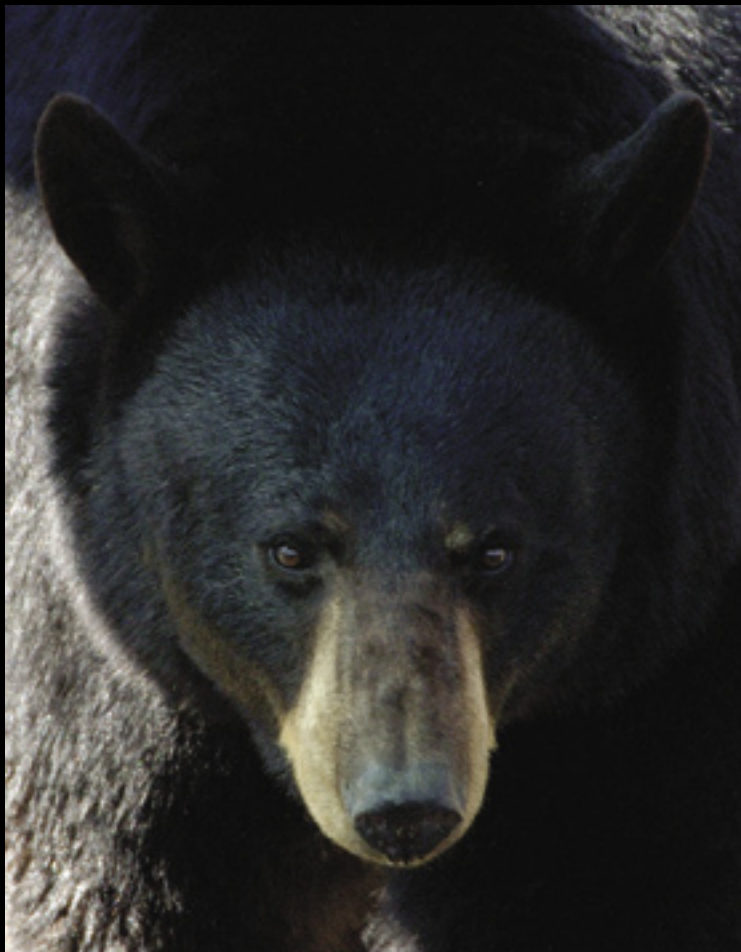
# MARYLAND'S BLACK BEARS

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Maryland's black bear population is on the move. Rebounding from an "endangered species" status just three decades ago, its numbers have increased dramatically in western Maryland and surrounding states. Today's improved habitat conditions and regional conservation initiatives in recent years have contributed to the rising population making black bear sightings a common occurrence in Allegany and Garrett counties. Precautions must be taken to minimize conflicts between people and bears as they increasingly co-exist in western Maryland.



by 1980 the black bear's population had rebounded significantly, and concerns for its survival in the region were alleviated. In recent years the black bear has once again been making news but for different reasons. A thriving Maryland black bear population, estimated to be nearly 400 adult and subadult animals west of Cumberland, has brought the species into close encounters with people on numerous occasions. While these unplanned events are generally peaceful, residents and visitors must remain aware of the potential danger posed by such meetings.

Black bears were an integral part of Maryland's wildlife population before settlers began to clear the forest for agricultural, industrial, and timbering purposes in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries. Destruction of habitat caused the bears to depart from most Maryland counties, concentrating them in the less developed and sparsely populated rugged mountains of western Allegany and Garrett Counties. Even the surviving species in those areas dwindled to just a few by the mid 1950's. Concerns for the black bear's survival were translated into action as public awareness of the animal's plight led to programs and laws dedicated to its survival. More fundamental reasons, like the return of secondary growth forests, provided favorable habitat that nurtured increasing numbers of bears. Consequently,

Harry Spiker, Maryland Department of Natural Resources and Wildlife Heritage Service biologist, describes black bears as energy efficient animals, meaning they expend the least amount of energy possible. "If bears can get food that is deliberately provided by people or from dumpsters and birdfeeders, they will quickly take those foods over the wild foods. Right now, trash is our biggest issue. We try to educate residents and visitors about the dangers of providing food for bears, but unfortunately, not everyone listens or knows. The worst case I encountered was when a visitor smeared cake icing on trash can lids to entice bears. These situations can cause problems because seven days later the next guests may have young children and be afraid of an encounter with a bear, yet

the previously fed bear will return looking for another handout.” The best way to avoid bear problems is to not attract them in the first place. This would include unintentional attractions such as storing food in tents. It is also important to note that deliberately placing food or bait in order to attract bears is a dangerous act that will cause individuals to be fined; feeding bears is illegal in the state of Maryland.

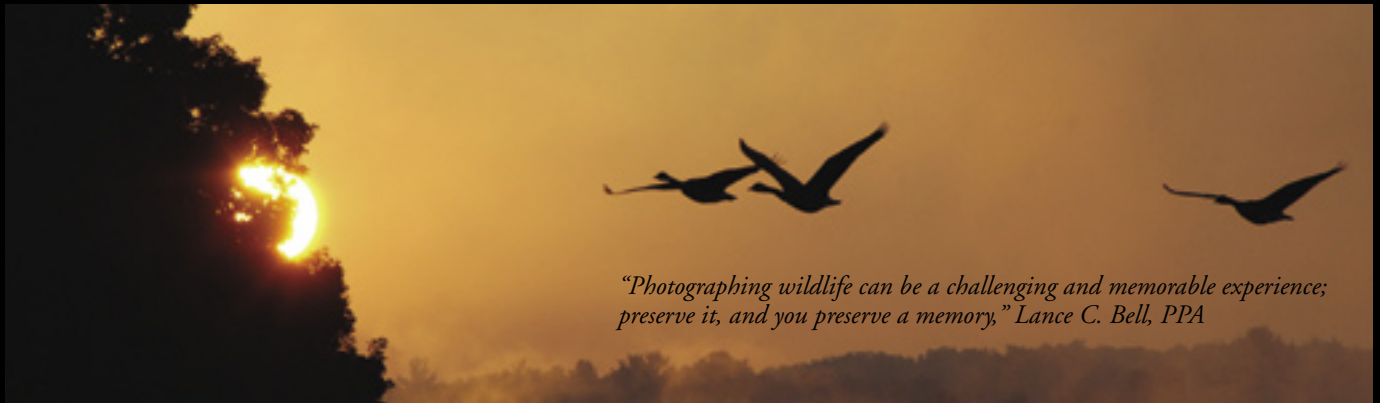
Biologist Spiker stresses that bears are agile, swift, strong, and large; an adult usually weighs between 125 and 400 pounds. Fortunately, black bears are not aggressive animals, “but due to their size, they don’t have to be aggressive to be dangerous.” A bear, believing it is caught in a defensive situation, may strike out. One example would be when an individual comes between a sow and her cubs. Many times people see the cubs and run toward them, not realizing that the mother will be nearby. The mother will strike out if she thinks her cubs are in danger. This also applies to situations where cubs are in a tree. By running toward the tree and circling its base, the mother may believe her cubs are in imminent danger with no escape pathways. It is always best to leave cubs alone. The sow will return to her cubs once people leave the area.

If one unexpectedly encounters a black bear at close range, it is advised to remain upright and slowly back away, increasing the animal’s possible number of escape routes. Never run away. If a bear approaches from a distance, loud noises will generally scare it away. Banging pans, yelling, and use of an air horn or whistle have proven to be effective deterrents. Most bears fear humans and willingly retreat without additional encouragement.

Maryland DNR officials have documented a spike in nuisance complaints that coincided with recent increases

in bear population density. Mortality surveys, conducted since 1981, provided another means to monitor population trends. With documented evidence that the bear population was rising, the state of Maryland initiated a ten year bear management plan in 1992. As that plan ended, the department organized a Black Bear Task Force to provide guidance in developing a new management plan. The BBTF was comprised of citizens with varied interests from across the state. All members agreed that black bears are a valued part of Maryland’s ecosystem. The task force specifically recommended that current strategies focus on bear population studies, problem management, a black bear nuisance response plan, and research efforts. Public opinion surveys will be an ongoing program intending to gather pertinent information for the management plan. Upon receiving recommendations from the BBTF, Maryland DNR has completed a new ten year bear management plan. Maryland DNR also has additional services including outreach and educational programs, a Black Bear Compensation Stamp fund, assistance to landowners who are experiencing bear problems, and an electric fencing and technical support system to beehive owners.

The Maryland Department of Natural Resources and the Wildlife and Heritage Service continue to investigate new human-bear conflict resolution tools and techniques. Some of those tools and related information may be found in an eight page booklet titled, “Maryland’s Bear Country, Learning To Live With Bears.” The booklet is available from Maryland Department of Natural Resources upon request. While new ideas are being considered, the old adage about using one’s common sense and good judgment may be the best advice to consider when living with Maryland’s black bears.



*“Photographing wildlife can be a challenging and memorable experience; preserve it, and you preserve a memory,” Lance C. Bell, PPA*