

# Bringing Back the Bear

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To most of us, "bear country" means the Great Smoky Mountains, not south Alabama swamps. Yet, black bears still roam hundreds of thousands of acres in the Mobile-Tensaw Delta and adjacent lands north and west of Mobile.

Auburn biologists conducted a small study of the bears west of the Mobile River in the mid-1980s, and trapping crews from Virginia Tech and the University of Tennessee captured and released ten bears in the same area in 1993. No one knows how many bears remain, or even whether they are increasing, decreasing, or stable. Disturbing indications of inbreeding and reduced fertility in this seemingly isolated population could mean Alabama's remnant bear population is only a few generations away from being our last.

Black bears once ranged throughout Alabama, as is evidenced by at least 35 counties having a Bear Branch, Bear Creek, Bear Hollow, or some such name given by early settlers. By Civil War times, clearing of land for agriculture combined with unregulated hunting had already decimated bears and other wildlife. In 1921, biologist Arthur H. Howell reported Alabama's bears "exterminated everywhere except in the swamps of the southern counties."

Ironically, Howell found white-tailed deer to be no better off:

"The only part of the State where deer are still abundant is in the big wooded swamps of the lower Tensaw and Mobile Rivers." Some predicted the deer's extinction, but the recovery of deer in Alabama has been a remarkable success largely due to the efforts of the Department of Conservation, the Alabama Wildlife Federation, the Stimpson family, and countless landowners and hunters.

Some have asked, "If conservationists brought back the deer in Alabama, why not do the same for bears, at least in some areas?" Once maligned as varmints, bears are gaining popularity as attitudes change. Many Alabamians

now want the experience of seeing a bear in their home state, or at least having the knowledge that they are still out there, a reminder of our wild natural heritage.

David Milton of Guntersville is an example of the difference one person can make. He is not a biologist; he restores old houses, but he likes bears and has a strong conservation ethic. In early 1997, David organized a public meeting in Mobile to get people talking about bringing

back Alabama's bears.

The time was right, and this led to a partnership between the Alabama Wildlife Federation and The Nature Conservancy to facilitate the formation of the Alabama Black Bear Alliance (ABBA), a broad-based coalition of diverse interests with the goal of working cooperatively and voluntarily for the conservation of the black bear in Alabama through education, research, and management. Representatives from state and federal agencies, the forest industry, conservation groups, private landowners, and



others have begun meeting to develop a new conservation strategy for Alabama's bears.

Before a sound strategy can be implemented, we need to have a better understanding of the present status and dynamics of the population. The fundamental question of how many bears exist and can be supported in and around the Mobile-Tensaw Delta is yet to be answered, and little is known of the suitability of other habitats for supporting bears elsewhere in Alabama. A research project is currently being developed by Dr. Joe Clark at the University of Tennessee, with Auburn University playing a supporting role.

It is worth noting that Charles Kelley, long-time Director of the Game and Fish Division and one of the individuals most credited with the recovery of deer in Alabama, has voiced his agency's strong support for ABBA. While no one expects the bear's recovery to parallel that of the deer, Alabama's beleaguered bears may yet have a bright future. AWF will keep you informed of ABBA's progress.