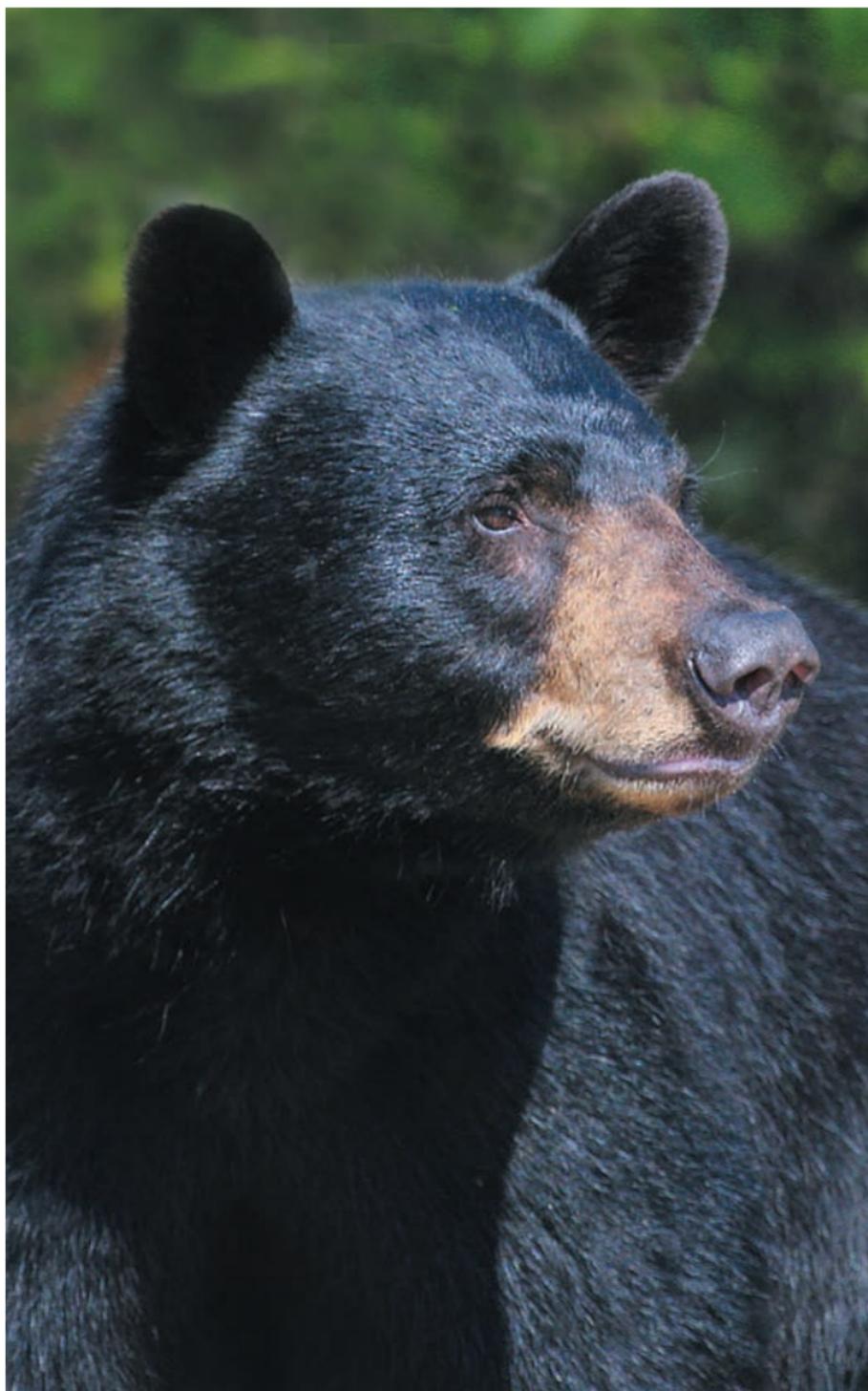


# A guide to living in **bear country**



*Ashley Hockenberry*



**Florida Fish and Wildlife  
Conservation Commission**

[MyFWC.com/Bear](https://myfwc.com/Bear)



Ashley Hockenberry

## **If you are in Florida, you should know**

Florida's black bear population has recovered from historically low numbers in most areas of the state, while at the same time the number of people has increased in and around where bears live. As a result, bears and people encounter each other more than ever. Keeping bears wild and away from the places where people live and work is a responsibility we all share to ensure they remain a valued part of Florida's natural heritage.

Living in bear country provides rewarding opportunities for residents and visitors to view Florida's largest land mammal. Observe them from a distance, as a bear near your home or workplace is usually just passing through. However, if you experience human-bear conflicts, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) can assist you.

The FWC receives over 5,000 bear related calls annually, with most people reporting bears in their yards or getting into garbage.

Human-bear conflicts are preventable. Most conflicts result from people feeding bears either intentionally or unintentionally, even though feeding is illegal in Florida. Bears are attracted to neighborhoods that allow access to food sources – such as garbage, pet food and birdseed – and will quickly learn to associate homes and businesses with getting an easy meal. This behavior becomes more evident in fall, when bears eat up to 20,000 calories a day to bulk up for winter. Bears that become too comfortable around people are more likely to be killed by collisions with vehicles, by someone taking an illegal action or by FWC to address a public safety risk.



Ashley Hockenberry

**It is illegal to place food or garbage out that attracts bears and causes conflicts. Anything that attracts dogs, cats or raccoons also will attract bears!**

## **The bear facts**

Black bears are the only species of bear in Florida and once roamed the entire state.

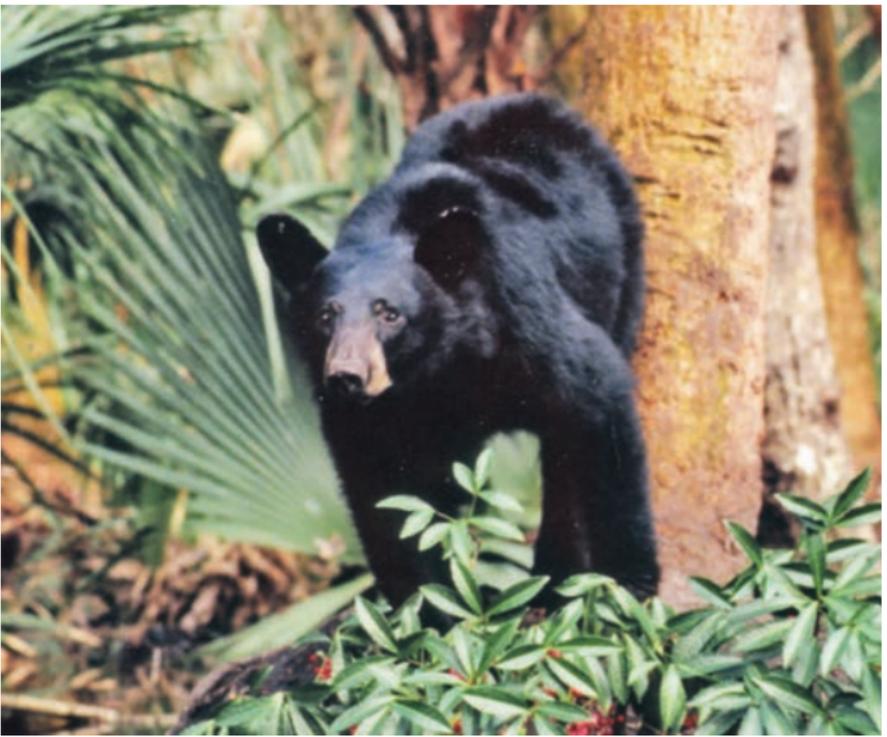
- FWC biologists estimate approximately 4,000 black bears roam Florida today, compared to as few as 300 bears in the 1970s.
- Florida bears generally have black fur with a tan muzzle and sometimes a white chest patch called a blaze.
- Adult black bears typically weigh between 150 to 400 pounds, with males often twice the size of females.
- Female bears have their first litter at about 3 1/2 years old and usually have one to three cubs every other year.
- In Florida, bear breeding season runs from about June to August, with cubs born in late January or early February.
- Bears typically range over a large area: 15 square miles for females and 62 square miles for males.
- Bears have the best sense of smell of any land mammal, seven times better than a bloodhound.
- 80% of a black bear's diet comes from plants such as fruits, nuts and berries, 15% from insects like termites, ants and bees, and 5% from meat such as opossums, armadillos and carrion.

**For more bear facts, visit [MyFWC.com/Bear](https://myfwc.com/Bear).**

Learn more about bears with the Florida Black Bear Curriculum Guide. The guide is designed for teachers and students in grades 3 to 8 and offers a comprehensive series of lessons on Florida's black bears.

Visit [www.blackbearinfo.com](http://www.blackbearinfo.com) for more information.





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## Why not relocate bears?

Unfortunately, relocation typically does not resolve human-bear conflicts. In Florida, it is rare to find public lands large and remote enough where bears can be moved without coming in contact with people. Relocated bears typically leave the new area to return to their original home or because the new habitat is already occupied by other bears. The result can be bears wandering through unfamiliar areas and crossing busy roads, which creates a danger to motorists and bears. In addition, relocated bears very often exhibit the same unwanted behavior they did before, so relocation may just shift the problem to a new place. For all these reasons, relocation is neither a desirable nor effective way to solve human-bear conflicts.

The FWC is committed to providing effective solutions to conflicts that address the safety concerns of residents and visitors, as well as the long-term well-being of bears.

## Bear behavior and you

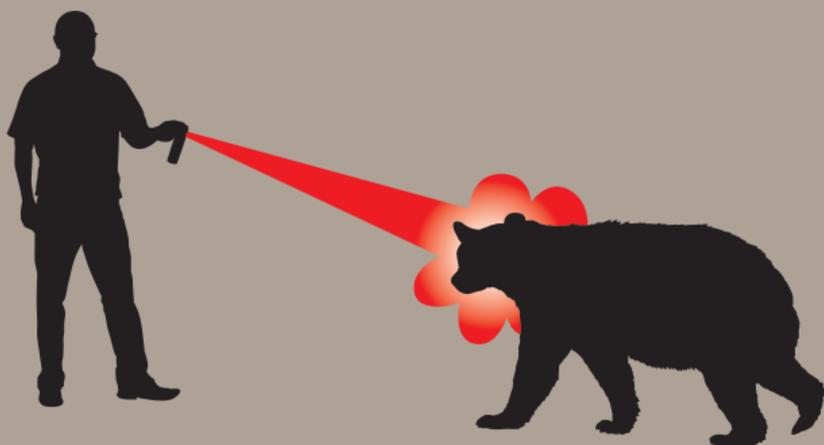
Black bears are shy animals and generally not aggressive towards people. When bears are frightened they run away or climb a tree. If a bear is in a tree in your neighborhood, it is either feeding or trying to escape danger. Keep people and pets away, and the bear will come down and leave on its own when it feels safe, usually after dark. When a bear stands on its hind legs, it is only trying to get a better view or scent, rather than acting in a threatening manner. Black bears may huff, snap their jaws, swat the ground or “bluff charge” when cornered, threatened or

defending food or young. If this happens, stop, hold your ground and then slowly back away. Always remember to respect bears – they are large, powerful, wild animals that can act unpredictably and become dangerous. Bears used to getting food from people may lose their natural fear of human contact and are more likely to damage property or become a public safety threat. NEVER feed or attract bears. If a bear is eating something on your property, take note of what it is and secure it after the bear has left the area.

Here are some tips on how to be BearWise, remain safe around black bears and reinforce their natural fear of people:

- Never approach a bear. Keep as much distance between you and the bear as possible.
- If a bear changes its behavior because of your presence, you are too close.
- When walking dogs, keep them close and be aware of your surroundings. Dogs can trigger defensive behaviors from bears.
- Report any bear threatening the safety of people, pets or livestock, or causing property damage to the FWC (see back cover).
- If you encounter a bear at close range, remain standing upright with arms raised, back up slowly and speak to the bear in a calm, assertive voice.
- Do not turn your back, play dead or run from a black bear. Back away slowly into a secure area such as a house, car or building.

**Carry bear spray and learn how to use it properly, factoring in wind direction, distance to bear (20-30 ft.) and your escape route. Make sure to buy spray specific for use on bears.**



- Make sure you are in a secure area and the bear has a clear escape route, then yell loudly, bang pots and pans, blow a whistle, or use an air horn or car horn to scare the bear away.
- Install a motion-activated device, such as flood lights, a water sprinkler or audio alarm, to scare a bear away from a location when you are not present.

**Warning! It is illegal to take, possess, injure, shoot, collect or sell black bears under Florida state law unless authorized by Commission issued permit. If you are found guilty, you could face fines and/or jail time.**



Rick Sinnott, ADFG

## **Discouraging bears from visiting your home**

Bears do not linger in neighborhoods if they do not find food. Properly storing or securing garbage and other attractants is a proven method of preventing bear conflicts around homes, neighborhoods and businesses. However, it takes a community-wide effort to keep bears wild and away from people. These items will attract bears:

- Unsecured trash and unwashed recycling containers
- Bird and squirrel feeders with items like seed, suet and peanuts



Milt Fox

- Wildlife feeders
- Pet food and bowls
- Barbeque grills and smokers
- Small animals such as chickens, goats, pigs and rabbits
- Animal feed like corn, grain and pet food
- Composting unsuitable materials
- Beehives
- Fruit and nut-bearing trees and shrubs
- Unsecured outdoor freezers, refrigerators or coolers



## Securing garbage:

- Store garbage and unwashed recyclables in bear-resistant containers or in a secure area, such as a sturdy shed or garage, until the morning of pickup, or
- Build a small shed to store trash cans. Be sure there are no gaps along the shed's edges and use screws instead of nails. If the shed is curbside, call your waste service provider to ensure they will service trash cans from a shed, or



- Retrofit your regular trash can to make it more bear-resistant by adding hardware. For a retrofit to be successful, the lid must not be flexible and the can must not collapse when you stand on its side. Call your waste service provider to ensure they will service a retrofitted trash can, or
- Request a commercially manufactured bear-resistant trash can from your waste service provider. If they do not provide these cans, you can special order one from a hardware store, but ensure your waste service provider will service it.

## Securing other bear attractants:

- Use electric fencing to protect gardens, garbage, compost piles, beehives, fruit trees and livestock.

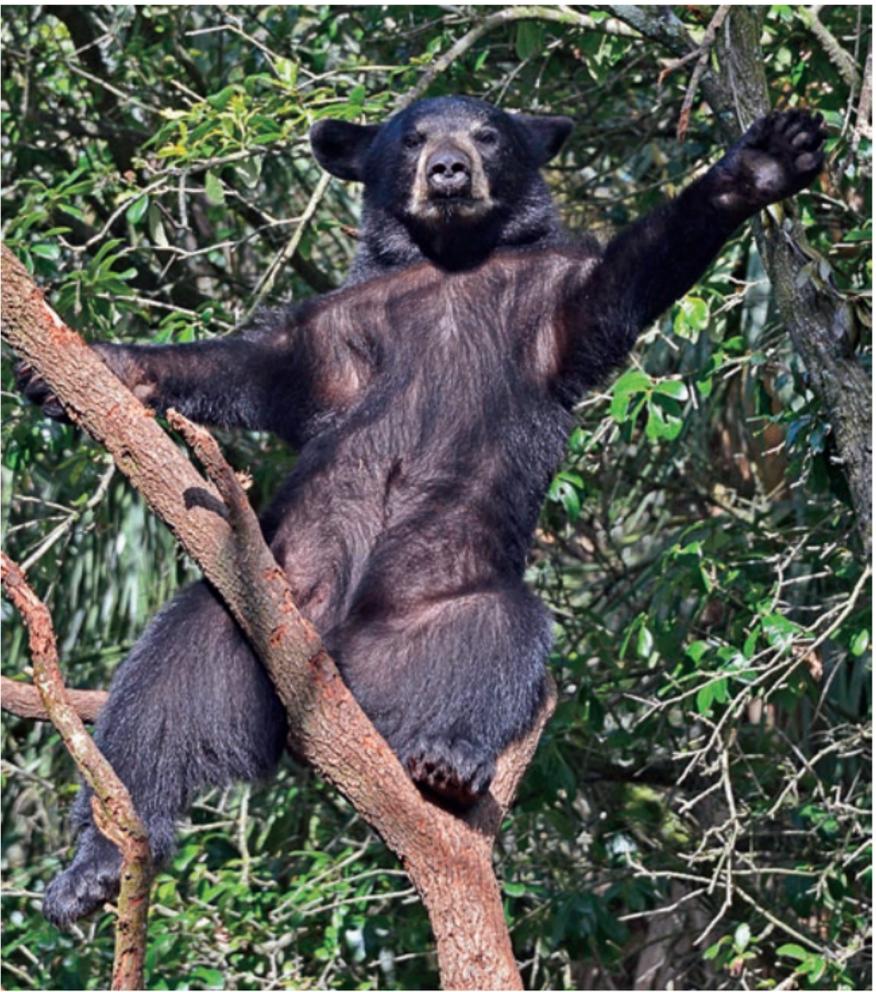


- Feed pets indoors or bring food dishes (even empty ones) inside before dark.
- Store pet and livestock feed in bear-resistant containers or inside a secure area.
- Remove or modify bird and wildlife feeders and ensure the ground is free of all feed and debris.
- Keep gardens and fruiting trees and shrubs tidy. Remove rotten fruit and harvest ripe nuts, fruits and vegetables.
- Create an Unwelcome Mat by placing finishing nails, heads up, 2 inches apart with no more than 3/4 of an inch of the nail sticking up, into a sheet of anchored plywood to keep bears away from a specific area, such as under a window or door, along a patio edge or an opening in a fence.



- Keep outdoor refrigerators and freezers in a secure location or lock up with super-adhesive anchors, like Marine Locks™.
- Clean meat smokers and barbeque grills with a degreasing detergent and store in a secure area. Properly dispose of any food remnants after each use.

**NOTE: Screened porches are not secure from bears.**



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Visit [MyFWC.com/Bear](http://MyFWC.com/Bear) for tips on how to secure bear attractants, videos about bears and how to install electric fencing and to learn more about bear-resistant containers.

**Funds from Florida's "Conserve Wildlife" license plate help conserve bears and reduce human-bear conflicts. Buy one today at your local tax collector's office or online at [BuyAPlate.com](http://BuyAPlate.com).**



# Where bears live in Florida



If you are experiencing bear conflicts, please contact the nearest FWC regional office.

North Central	Lake City	(386) 758-0525
Northeast	Ocala	(352) 732-1225
Northwest	Panama City	(850) 265-3676
South	West Palm Beach	(561) 625-5122
Southwest	Lakeland	(863) 648-3200

If you suspect illegal activity, call FWC's Wildlife Alert Hotline at 888-404-FWCC (3922).

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