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*Photo from pixabay*

## CONSERVATION BRIEF

# THE SUSTAINABLE HARVEST OF BLACK BEAR POPULATIONS IN NORTH AMERICA

This document provides an overview of the North American black bear (*Ursus americanus*) natural history, populations status, conservation and management efforts, utilization by people, and the security of sustainable bear populations throughout their range.

## Natural History

Black bears are highly adaptable mammals with a varied diet consisting of fruits, nuts, insects, small mammals, deer fawns, moose and caribou calves, and carrion. They are opportunistic feeders, often adjusting their diet based on seasonal availability. These solitary animals have home ranges that vary depending on food resources, with males occupying larger territories than females. Breeding occurs in summer, and females give birth to 1-3 cubs in winter dens, ensuring their survival during the harshest months.

Black bears thrive in diverse habitats, including deciduous and coniferous forests, swamps, and mountainous regions. Their adaptability allows them to inhabit both remote wilderness areas and regions near suburban areas. Adequate food availability and denning sites are essential factors in determining suitable habitats for black bear populations.

## Status of Black Bears in North America

Black bears are one of the most abundant and widely distributed large carnivores in North America. Their range extends across much of Canada, the United States, and parts of northern Mexico. Current estimates place the continental population at over 800,000 individuals, with particularly strong numbers in Canada and the U.S., including expanding populations in the eastern and midwestern states where they had once declined. Black bears are protected by law in the States

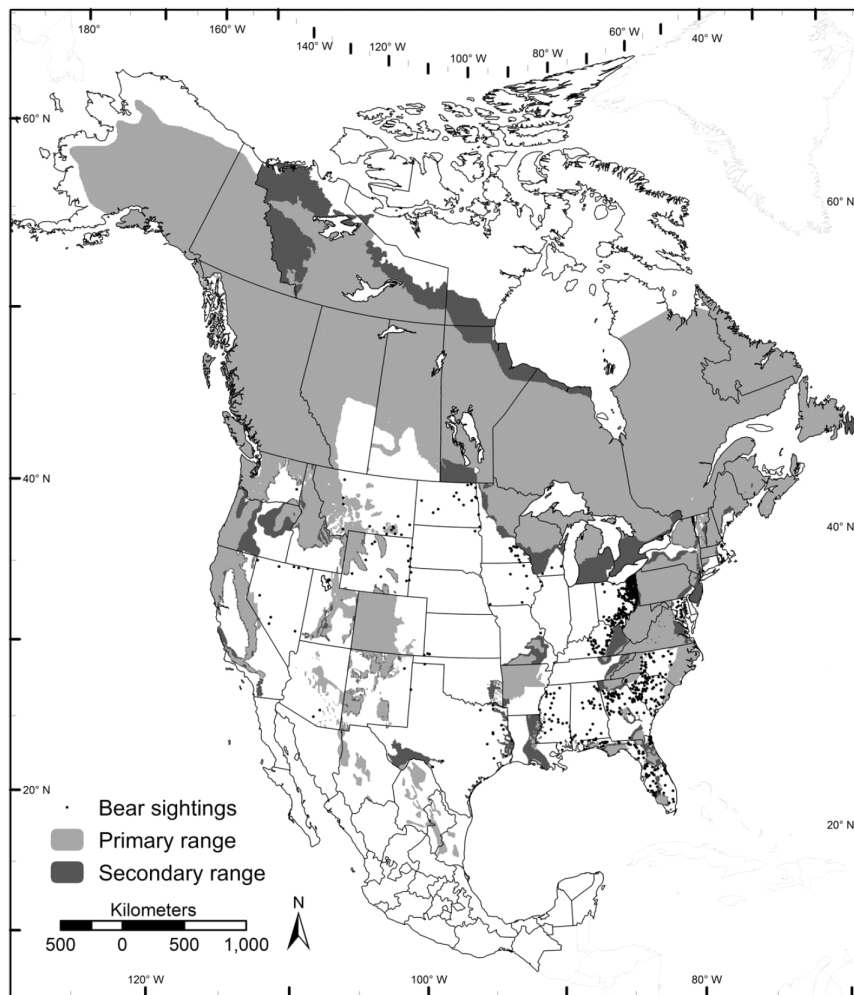


## The Recovery of the Louisiana Black Bear

Once listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act, the Louisiana black bear subspecies (*Ursus americanus luteolus*) has made a remarkable recovery. Conservation efforts, including habitat restoration and legal protections, led to its removal from the threatened species list in 2016 and the reinstatement of black bear hunting in Louisiana. The success of this program serves as a model for future wildlife conservation initiatives.

Photo by Greg Norgaard/  
Getty Images

and Provinces so that, in areas where harvest does occur, it can be managed and highly regulated or disallowed as needed. Black bears are not considered endangered anywhere in North America and are classified as Least Concern by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) due to their large, stable, and in many areas, growing populations. Their listing in CITES Appendix II is a precautionary measure to regulate international trade and prevent illegal trafficking of bear parts, especially to protect more threatened bear species around the world with similar biological traits.



Estimated primary and secondary range for American black bears in North America, 2009–2012, with sightings reported 2006–2010 outside of range. Only primary range was designated in Mexico. Additional maps representing each country and region are available in Supplemental Material Fig. S1.

## Utilization of Black Bears by People: Regulated “Take”

Hunters have played a pivotal role in the resurgence of black bear populations across North America through their contributions to the Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration (WSFR) Program. Established by the Pittman-Robertson Act of 1937, this program imposes an 11% excise tax on firearms, ammunition, and archery equipment, directing



*Above, a sedated black bear is fitted with a radio collar. Over the past decade, 24 states have used WSFR funds to conduct 87 black bear research and conservation projects. These initiatives have been instrumental in the remarkable recovery and expansion of black bear populations, transforming them from near extinction to thriving numbers.*

*Photo by Maine Department of Inland Fisheries & Wildlife*

the funds to state wildlife agencies for conservation efforts. Over the past decade, 24 states have utilized these funds to conduct 87 black bear research and conservation projects, including survival studies, population estimates, and habitat assessments. These initiatives have been instrumental in the remarkable recovery and expansion of black bear populations, transforming them from near extinction to thriving numbers today. Without the financial support generated by these excise taxes through the WSFR Program, such conservation successes would have been unattainable.

Hunting and trapping of black bears is highly regulated across North America, with seasons established to control harvests and ensure sustainable populations. Strict regulations, including licensing, tag limits, open and closed seasonal restrictions, sale restrictions on bear parts and other measures help maintain healthy black bear populations. Black bears can be legally hunted in 27 U.S. states and 12 Canadian provinces and territories (the only Canadian province where bear hunting does not occur is Prince Edward Island which has no black bear population). Harvest by means of regulated trapping is permitted in one U.S. state and six Canadian provinces and territories.

Black bears are primarily harvested for their meat, which is a wild, free-ranging, locally sourced food resource. Many hunters share this harvest with non-hunting households. Between 2014 and 2019 on average 43,000 black bears were harvested under regulated seasons in North America. This equates to over 50 million meals of black bear meat for households throughout North America (Wild Harvest Initiative). Most hunters are utilizing harvested bears for multiple reasons, but almost all are used for food. Bear pelts are used for decorative rugs, taxidermy mounts, and fur clothing such as hats, caps, and mittens. In addition, claws, teeth, bones, and fat are utilized as well.

## Use of Black Bear Fur for “Bearskin Caps”

While most bears are harvested for food, an ethic of harvest is also to utilize as much of the animal as possible, including the pelt. One use of black bear pelts is for military caps. The bearskin cap, a distinctive military headdress, traces its origins to the mid-17th century in Europe. Initially, grenadiers wore cloth caps adorned with fur to prevent sagging and enhance their stature on the battlefield. This practice evolved, and by 1761, French grenadiers adopted tall fur caps resembling the Prussian mitre cap, aiming to project an imposing presence. Following the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, the British Grenadier Guards began wearing



*Bearskin caps are primarily ceremonial. The standard bearskin cap for British foot guards stands 11 inches tall at the front, 16 inches at the rear, weighs approximately 1.5 pounds, and is crafted from the fur of the North American black bear.*

bearskin caps, a tradition that extended to other British units and various other militaries in subsequent years.

In contemporary times, bearskin caps are primarily ceremonial. In Canada, ceremonial units like the Governor General's Foot Guards and the Canadian Grenadier Guards wear traditional bearskin caps. The Band of The Royal Regiment of Canada also includes bearskins in their full-dress uniforms. In the United States, bearskin caps are worn ceremonially by drum majors in elite military bands, such as "The President's Own" U.S. Marine Band and the U.S. Army Band, reflecting historic military traditions. European countries including Denmark, Sweden and Norway issue bearskin caps to some members of their military. In the United Kingdom, bearskin caps are notably worn by the Foot Guards and the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards. The standard bearskin cap for British foot guards stands 11 inches tall at the front, 16 inches at the rear, weighs approximately 1.5 pounds, and is crafted from the fur of the North American black bear. The British Army sources these caps from a hatmaker that acquires between 50 and 100 black bear skins annually at international auctions and through fur brokers. Despite discussions about synthetic alternatives, the Ministry of Defense maintains that artificial materials have not yet matched the natural properties and qualities of bear fur. Sustainable harvest practices throughout North America ensure that this use and trade does not negatively impact bear populations. Strict regulations and monitoring prevent overexploitation while allowing for the continued cultural and historical use of black bear fur. The use of bear pelts is environmentally appropriate, and fake fur has both ecological impacts to manufacture and does not wear as well as real fur.

## Conclusion

The restoration of black bear populations throughout North America has advanced, in part because the public can sustainably harvest them. The use of black bear pelts for caps does not threaten bear populations in North America. This use is consistent with the conservation heritage and cultural practices of utilization of wildlife by the public and such use is conducted under scientific principles, with laws in place that are rigorously enforced to protect bear populations from overharvest and ensure appropriate ethical harvest methods in North America. The practice of using bear pelts for bearskin caps is also consistent with and respectful of the social and cultural heritage of military organizations. This practice is mindful and respectful of conservation principles worldwide.



### The BearWise Program

The BearWise program, developed by wildlife agencies, educates individuals and communities on how to live responsibly in bear country. Its initiatives include public awareness campaigns, practical guidelines for homeowners, and policy recommendations for local governments to manage human-bear interactions effectively.

For more information, visit [bearwise.org](http://bearwise.org)

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### NORTH AMERICA MAP COURTESY OF:

Scheick, B.K. and W. McCown. 2014. Geographic distribution of American black bears in North America. *Ursus* 25(1)24-33.



*Photo courtesy of BearWise*