



LIVING WITH BEARS IN POLK COUNTY

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Florida black bears, *Ursus americanus floridanus*, currently inhabit only a portion of their historic habitat but bear sightings are on the rise. The sharp decline in populations and habitat resulted in the listing of Florida black bear on the state threatened species list in 1974. Florida's Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) estimates there are at least 3,000 bears living in Florida.

Do Bears Live In Polk County?

Bears prefer habitat that includes a mixture of upland and lowland areas that can provide the food, water, and shelter they need. Bears live throughout Florida but there are certain areas of the state known to have higher populations. Polk County's southeast corner contains what FWC calls "secondary range" or an area important to bear movement and habitat but does not have frequent documentation of breeding or female sightings.

Primary ranges contain core bear populations: regular evidence of reproduction and prime habitat. There are seven "primary ranges" in Florida: Eglin, Apalachicola, Osceola, Ocala/St. Johns, Big Cypress, Glades/Highlands, and Chassahowitska.

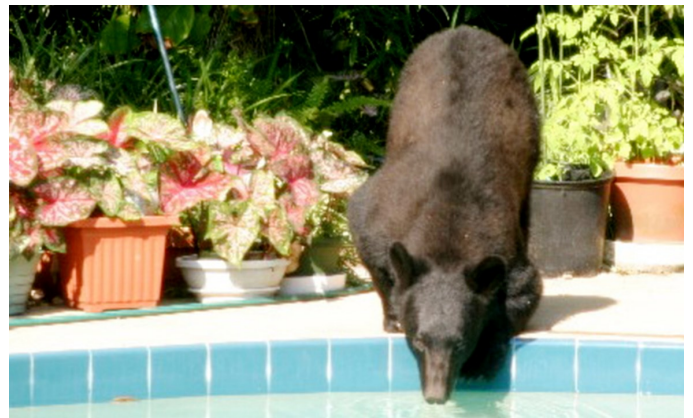


PHOTO BY: PATTY UNDERWOOD/FWC

What Do Bears Eat?

Bears are omnivores, meaning they eat a varied diet consisting of fruits, nuts and other plant matter (80%), insects (16%), and meat (4%). They are opportunistic feeders and can smell food from over a mile away.

Remember, bears will eat things we may not consider food like garbage, pet food, bird seed, or hunting remnants.

Reduce the potential for bear conflicts in your neighborhood by securing garbage in a sturdy shed or garage and taking it to the curb on the morning of pick up rather than the night before.

What If I See A Bear?

Bears will let you know if they feel uncomfortable by pawing at the ground, chomping their jaws, huffing, or even moaning. These actions do not mean a bear is about to attack, this is their way of letting you know they want you to leave.

If you encounter a bear at a distance, do not approach the bear. Enjoy the experience from a safe distance and back away slowly. Surprising a bear, blocking escape routes, and making eye contact could make the bear feel threatened and should be avoided if at all possible.

If you encounter a bear at close range, there are some simple things to remember for your safety:

- Stay calm
- Do not make eye contact
- Make yourself look big
- Back away slowly

Black bears are fast runners and great climbers. Never run or climb a tree to escape a bear; it may trigger their chase instinct and possibly an attack.

If a bear stands up, try not to react. Bears are curious and will stand up to get a better look at you and their surroundings.

What Can I Do About A Bear Around My Home?

Bears are naturally shy and fearful of humans unless they have been previously fed. Reinforce their timid nature by scaring bears that wander onto your property or near your home. Some things to remember before “scaring that bear”:

- Ensure the bear has an easy escape route away from you and your home
- Check that you are in a secure area at a safe distance from the bear
- Use noise or water to scare the bear away

Hitting pots and pans together, turning on sprinklers, or honking car horns are all acceptable ways to scare off a bear. Remember, bears are a protected species and should not be harmed in any way.

Where can I Find More Information?

For more information on Florida black bears and how to avoid conflicts with them, see Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission’s (FWC) black bear website at www.MyFWC.com/bear.

To report human-bear conflicts, a bear in your neighborhood, or someone feeding/attracting bears, call the FWC regional office in Lakeland at 863-648-3200 during business hours or FWC’s Toll-Free Wildlife Alert Hotline (1-888-404-3922) after-hours.

For more information and advice for residents, see University of Florida IFAS Extension’s document “Living with the Florida Black Bear: a Homeowner's Guide to Nuisance Bear Prevention” at www.edis.ifas.ufl.edu/uw250.

Or, Call your County Extension Agent:

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