



The Return Of Teddy's Bear

By Brad Young

Living in present day Mississippi, it's hard for us to imagine what President Theodore Roosevelt saw when he stepped off that train at Smedes Station back in 1902. Of course he was greeted by the usual crowd of several hundred spectators, but, on this trip, there is little doubt that his eyes looked beyond the crowd to the vast Delta wilderness which was home to what he was really there to see – the Louisiana black bear.

It is well known that the President was an avid sportsman, having hunted wild game all over the country. Despite his many trophies of buffalo, pronghorn, and grizzly bear, the president desperately wanted the thrill of a mounted black bear hunt.

And where would the President of the United States go when he wanted to experience one of the greatest bear hunting traditions in the country? Sharkey County, Mississippi.

The story of the hunt is well known throughout Mississippi. The President refused to shoot a semi-conscious bear that had been tied to a tree by his guide Holt Collier (who was, in his own right, one of the greatest bear hunters in American history).

A cartoonist caricatured the event in a sketch entitled "Drawing the Line in Mississippi" which showed the president turning away from a small frightened bear. A toy-maker saw the cartoon and asked the President's permission to name his stuffed bears "Teddy's Bear," and the rest, as they say, is history.

Today, as in 1902, Mississippi is well known for its abundant natural resources. Our state is home to some of the finest outdoor recreation and hunting opportunities found anywhere. History tells us that it was black bears that first put Mississippi on the map in the eyes of sportsmen all over the country.

In Paul Schullery's, *The Bear Hunter's Century*, five out of ten of North America's greatest bear hunters hunted bears in Mississippi at some point in their lives. Men such as Ben Lily, R.E. Bobo, Wade Hampton and, of course, President

Roosevelt and Holt Collier became legends in the world of hunting due to the fact that they hunted the Mississippi black bear.

Unfortunately, the vast expanses of bottomland hardwood forests that once covered the Mississippi Delta have been reduced to isolated remnants. Loss of habitat combined with the overharvest of bears, reduced Mississippi's bear population to what was believed to be less than a dozen animals in the entire state by 1932.

Black bears were listed as state endangered in 1984, and the Louisiana black bear (the subspecies that occurs in the southern two-thirds of the state) was listed as federally threatened in 1992. Today, biologists estimate Mississippi's black bear population at around 50 animals throughout the entire state.

How is this possible considering that populations of black bears continue to grow just across our state's borders in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Alabama? The answer is simple – Mississippi is lacking in female bears.

When bears become old enough to separate from their mother at about 18 months, they take very different routes

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depending on sex. Males often leave the area altogether, seeking a new territory to call home. Some males will cross the border into Mississippi.

Females, on the other hand, do not take such drastic measures. Usually they carve out a home range within or adjacent to that of their mother's home range thus, staying on the other side of the line.

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Shauna Ginger

Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks biologists and others, top, captured this black bear at Yazoo National Wildlife Refuge. Blood and data was taken from the bear, and the animal was fitted with a GPS radio collar and ear tags. Later, Biologist Brad Young, bottom, helped release the bear in the same area.



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Biologists captured this black bear last year in southern Wilkinson County. The bear's radio collar was changed so the animal's movements could continue to be monitored.



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When Louisiana State University researchers and others went into the bear's den, they found what most had never witnessed before in the wild – five young, healthy bear cubs. Each one was weighed, tagged, and various other information recorded.

for so long, many misconceptions have been passed down through the generations. Usually, the first thing that comes to mind when you say the word “bear” is a frightening image of huge teeth and razor sharp claws. Or maybe a story they heard about a group of campers being mauled while they slept.

Unfortunately, black bears receive much of their negative stereotypes from being confused with grizzly bears which are not found anywhere close to Mississippi, with the exception of a couple of zoos. Fact is, black bears are extremely shy and secretive animals that will avoid contact with humans at all costs.

Many people throughout Mississippi have bears that routinely pass through their property but never realize it because of the bear's shy nature. And while they are technically classified as carnivores, they are not active predators by any means. Studies have shown that the diet of southeastern black bears is composed of up to 90 percent plant matter including berries, acorns and grasses.

Another common misconception is that the presence of a black bear restricts landowner usage because of their federally threatened status. Not true. Black bears are generalists and can adapt and thrive in many habitat types.

Today, biologists with the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks (MDWFP) are working to conserve and learn more about the black bears that inhabit our state's natural lands. Research efforts are being made to trap and monitor bears throughout the state so we can learn more about their movements and habitat preferences.

In the last three years, four bears have been captured within Mississippi. The four male bears, ranging in size from 115 to 275 pounds, were tranquilized, given identifying ear tags, measured, PIT-tagged (a small microchip inserted underneath the skin that gives an identifying number when scanned), and fitted with a radio collar. These collars continue to provide a wealth of information about home range sizes and movements.

In addition to our “native” radio-collared males, Missis-

Mississippi Outdoors editor David Watts backed up in one narrow corner of the very cramped den and photographed U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist Shauna Ginger picking up and handing each cub to researchers just outside.

Mississippi has also become home to three radio-collared females from neighboring states. The first female was originally captured on the Texas National Wildlife Refuge near Tallulah, Louisiana and relocated to the Lake Ophelia NWR across the river from Wilkinson County. After raising the litter she was relocated with, she began to roam, eventually crossing the Mississippi River but remaining just across the state line in southern Louisiana.

During that time, a trail camera photographed her in the presence of a large male bear, so biologists were hopeful that she would den and have a litter during the upcoming winter – a first for a repatriated bear in Louisiana. Sure enough, LSU graduate student John Benson located her den in southern Wilkinson County on property owned by Entergy Corporation.

Upon further investigation, Benson confirmed that she had at least one cub by the cries heard from her den. A “den check” was planned as a cooperative effort between Entergy, MDWFP, Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, Louisiana State University and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologists.

After successfully tranquilizing the female, all in attendance were pleasantly surprised to find that she had given birth to five cubs, an exceptionally large litter for a southeastern black bear and the first documented birth of bear cubs in Mississippi in some 30 years. Shortly after discovering the cubs, another female bear abandoned her cubs and entered into Wilkinson County. It was later discovered they had been adopted by another repatriated female bear in the area. Both females have since remained in Wilkinson County.

Of equal interest to the two Louisiana females is the story of a female bear from Arkansas who was relocated from the White River NWR to the Felsenthal NWR in the spring of 2005. After staying in and around Felsenthal for some time, she and her lone male cub went missing.



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At the same time, sightings began to come in from the Warren/Issaquena County line about two bears, one of which was wearing an orange collar. After talking with biologists with the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission and the University of Tennessee, a telemetry flight confirmed that it was the female and cub that had gone



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Finding the bear’s den in the thicket of a cutover in southern Wilkinson County was no easy task. “Mississippi Outdoors” television videographer Scooter Whatley is standing on a downed tree limb above the den site.

missing. In a short time this female had covered close to 100 air miles and crossed the Mississippi River with her six-month-old cub.

Research on the radio collared males in the lower delta, along with the addition of the radio collared females from neighboring states, represent a huge step forward in our understanding of black bears in Mississippi. Perhaps even more important than our scientific research, is the interest and support that has been garnered thanks to this increase in publicity.

Mississippi has been given a chance to conserve an animal that was almost completely lost from our natural lands. By learning all we can about the Mississippi black bear and appreciating its natural place in the wild lands of our state, we can save a precious part of Mississippi’s natural heritage that was almost lost. No doubt, TR would be proud.

Brad Young is a black bear biologist at the Museum of Natural Science in Jackson.