

Black Bear Population Analyses 2015

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Abstract

Bear visitation rates averaged 53% for 18 bait station surveys conducted in the primary range (Zones A, B, and D), and 28% for 7 surveys conducted in the peripheral range (Zone C). Revised population models produced a statewide estimate of approximately 28,850 bears in fall 2015. A harvest of 4,750 bears was approved by the Natural Resources Board for the 2015 season.

Methods

Bear bait station surveys were conducted by wildlife management and research personnel in the 18 counties comprising the primary bear range and 7 counties within the peripheral range in 2015. The surveys were run between 15 June and 15 July, and consisted of 50 bait stations placed at 0.5-mile intervals along drivable roads. A plastic mesh overwrap bag filled with approximately 2 lb. of fresh meat was securely wired to a tree about 7 feet above the ground at each bait station. Bait stations were checked for bear visitations after 7 nights.

A station was considered to have been visited by bears if the bag of meat was gone and the wire securing it had been stretched or broken or by marks on the trees and/or trails leading to the station. Bait stations were considered inoperable and not included in the calculations if they could not be found or if animals other than bears had taken the bait.

Three-year running average visitation rates ($(\text{year} \times 2 + \text{year}^{+1})/3$ for first year; $(\text{year}^{-1} + \text{year} \times 2)/3$ for last year, and $(\text{year}^{-1} + \text{year} + \text{year}^{+1})/3$ for all other years) were used as an index to bear population trends. Combining years reduced annual fluctuations resulting from small sample sizes and annual changes in the abundance of natural foods.

All harvested bears are required to be registered at DNR or cooperative stations. An upper first premolar was collected as the bears were registered, and the sex and county of kill were recorded for each bear. Registration personnel were provided instructions and envelopes for storing the teeth. Teeth were sent to the Matson's Lab in Milltown, MT for processing, and ages were assigned by counting annuli in the cementum.

Wisconsin's Bear Population Model was adapted from one developed and used in Minnesota (Garshelis 1990). Zone-specific models were updated in 2014 to include the most recent bear harvest, age, and bait station data, and were used to estimate bear population size in each Bear Management Zone (Figure 1). Starting population size in the models was adjusted in all zones in 2013 based on estimates from the tetracycline mark-recapture study conducted in 2011 and 2012 (MacFarland 2009, Rolley et al. 2014). Previously models were calibrated to maximize the correlation between model simulated population trends and trends in bait-station visitations.

Results

Bear visitation rates in the 2015 bait station survey averaged 66% in Zone A, 44% in Zone B, 47% in Zone D, and 54% in the primary bear range (zones A, B, and D combined) (Table 1). Bear visitation rates in Zone C (peripheral range) averaged 28%.

The 3-year mean visitation rates in the primary bear range increased steadily during the mid 1980s and early 1990s, was fairly stable during the mid-to-late 1990s, slowly increased during the 2000s, declined during the late 2000s, and has been relatively stable the last few years (Fig. 2). In the peripheral range (Zone C), bait station data suggests a substantial increase in the bear population during the late 1990s and early 2000s; 3-year average visitation rates doubled from 17% to 35% during 1996-2004. Visitation rates during the last 8 years in Zone C were slowly increasing but may have started to stabilize.

Teeth were collected from 4,269 of the 4,526 bears harvested in 2014. Age data from bears harvested in 2014 are not available at this time. The age structure of female bears harvested during 1992-2013 has been relatively stable (Table 2); mean age of harvested female bears averaged 4.6 years (range 4.2 - 5.3). The age structure of harvested male bears has shifted to a younger distribution over the last 22 years with the mean age of harvested males declining from approximately 4 years to about 3 years over the period.

Zone-specific models were calibrated to yield estimates of the 2011 fall population that closely matched estimates from the 2011 tetracycline mark-recapture study. Population trends simulated from the models were strongly correlated to trends in bait-station visitations in zones A and B ($r = 0.94$ and 0.89) and the primary range (zones A, B, and D, $r = 0.92$, Fig. 2). Simulated population trends in zones C and D were moderately correlated to trends in bait-station visitation ($r = 0.72$ and 0.65). The models produced a statewide population estimate of approximately 28,850 bears in fall 2015 (Table 3). This included 5,700 bears in Zone A, 5,500 in Zone B, 8,450 in Zone C, and 9,200 in Zone D. The 2015 population estimates equate to bear densities of 1.0 bears/mi² of bear range in Zone A, 1.0 bears/mi² in Zone B, 0.9 bears/mi² of occupied range in Zone C, and 1.7 bears/mi² in Zone D.

Discussion

Population models that were calibrated to the 2011 zone-specific mark-recapture estimates, together with trends in bait-station visitations, suggest that higher harvests since 2009 reduced the bear population in Zone A and stabilized population growth in Zone B (Table 3). Our model for Zone D suggests that higher recent harvests in Zone D may be slowing population growth. The population model for Zone C suggests the population has continued to increase in recent years.

A third tetracycline mark-recapture study is scheduled to be conducted in 2016. These data will help further refine population estimates.

The Natural Resources Board approved a harvest quota of 4,750 bears for the 2015 season. This included 1,100 bears in Zone A, 750 in Zone B, 1,300 in Zone C, and 1,600 in Zone D.

Literature Cited

- Garshelis, D.L. 1990. Monitoring effects of harvest on black bear populations in North America: a review and evaluation of techniques. *East Workshop Black Bear Res. and Manage.* 10:120-144.
- MacFarland, D.M. 2009. Population estimation, habitat associations and range expansion of black bears in the upper Midwest. Ph.D. dissertation. University of Wisconsin, Madison.
- Rolley, R.E., D.M. MacFarland, N.M. Roberts, and T.R. Pearson. 2014. Black Bear Population Analyses, 2014. Pages 28-34 in J. Kitchell and B. Dhuey (editors). *Wisconsin Wildlife Surveys: August 2014*. Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, Bureau of Science Services, Madison, WI.

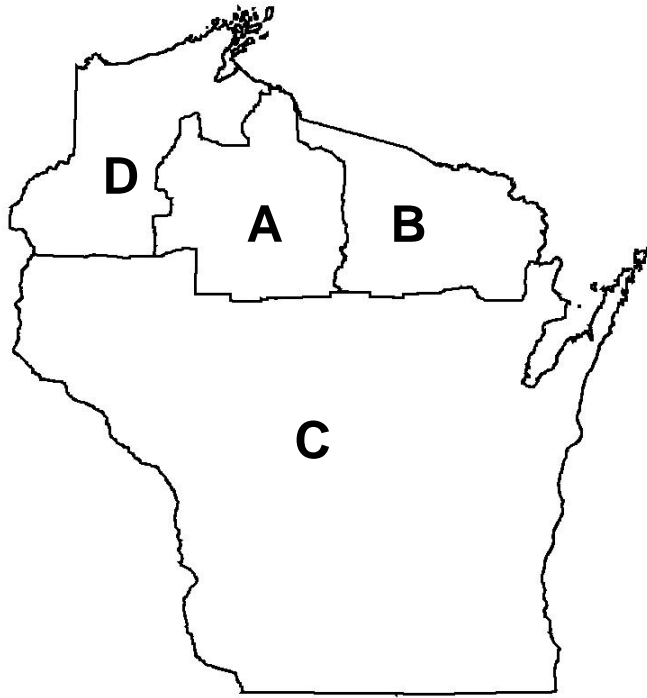


Figure 1. Wisconsin's Black Bear Management Zones, 2015.

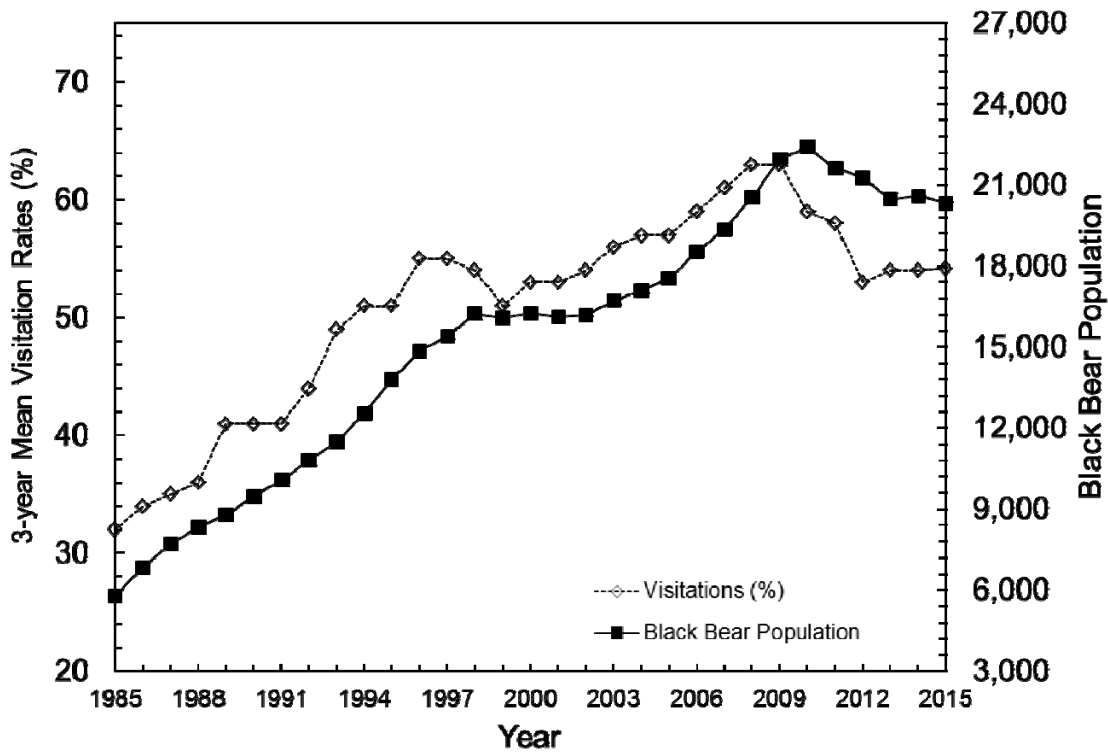


Figure 2. Bear visitation rates on bait station surveys (3-yr running average) and population estimates calculated by the revised models for the primary range (Zones A, B, and D), 1985-2015.

Table 1. *Percent of bear bait stations visited by bears, 2003-2015.*

County	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Ashland	57	86	71	76	52	59	66	33	42	27	32	69	65
Bayfield	65	46	75	52	76	67	44	67	64	56	53	69	39
Burnett	36	32	46	43	37	35	5	51	48	43	21	38	23
Douglas	33	30	30	30	41	73	49	63	33	50	38	48	43
Florence	53	67	83	66	86	75	68	79	30	59	79	79	56
Forest	60	74	62	63	88	78	76	84	58	76	57	82	55
Iron	55	79	64	69	71	58	88	77	94	76	30	23	63
Langlade	53	54	63	53	44	46	48	46	61	57	56	37	41
Lincoln	44	27	30	39	73	61	64	68	37	42	60	28	38
Marinette	24	47	50	48	64	31	32	57	34	41	23	27	31
Oconto	28	31	23	17	23	53	39	48	43	24	17	41	17
Oneida	95	70	48	54	57	54	39	62	49	60	55	61	70
Price	68	78	26	33	50	66	69	84	67	53	57	67	66
Rusk	58	80	98	68	98	92	92	93	78	98	88	79	72
Sawyer	79	67	90	77	87	80	70	60	60	46	51	64	59
Taylor	57	58	90	66	92	86	89	76	75	62	65	79	66
Vilas	47	33	32	56	39	68	34	41	28	29	40	26	62
Washburn	85	84	92	70	88	87	70	80	78	76	63	79	84
Primary Range	54	58	60	53	65	65	58	66	54	55	51	56	53
Barron	11	20	30	5	3	19	40	29	44	34	45	35	22
Chippewa	50	42	47	17	35	44	40	53	72	78	42	63	62
Clark	52	64	48	28	45	47	55	33	42	36	44	36	43
Jackson	15	14	8	24	13	14	13	15	20	11	3	10	8
Marathon	69	65	53	45	38	51	42	44	44	42	30	29	31
Menominee	9	35	14	0	6	26	9	13	---	---	---	38	16
Polk	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
Shawano	---	11	3	0	0	4	10	0	0	3	10	9	0
Peripheral Range	37	38	30	18	22	31	31	27	32	34	30	32	28

Table 2. Age classes of bears harvested in Wisconsin, 1992-2013.

Year	Sex	Percent in age class			No. aged	Mean age
		1-2 yr	3-9 yr	10+ yr		
1992	Male	63.9	32.1	4.0	474	3.5
	Female	48.4	45.0	6.6	380	4.3
1993	Male	50.9	41.7	7.4	405	4.3
	Female	37.8	57.3	4.9	286	4.6
1994	Male	62.6	31.4	6.0	441	3.9
	Female	50.9	45.0	4.1	271	4.2
1995	Male	55.7	41.4	2.9	600	3.6
	Female	37.7	52.0	10.5	435	5.3
1996	Male	60.0	37.3	2.7	771	3.6
	Female	46.8	45.6	7.6	536	4.7
1997	Male	65.0	32.6	2.5	765	3.5
	Female	47.9	44.2	7.9	620	4.6
1998	Male	65.0	33.4	1.6	1,134	3.3
	Female	49.0	44.2	6.9	904	4.5
1999	Male	67.6	29.9	2.4	1,058	3.3
	Female	51.5	39.3	9.2	954	4.7
2000	Male	68.1	29.0	2.9	1,227	3.3
	Female	49.8	41.5	8.7	1,046	4.7
2001	Male	67.8	29.2	3.0	1,250	3.4
	Female	51.2	40.8	8.0	1,023	4.6
2002	Male	59.5	34.6	5.9	1,094	3.9
	Female	44.5	43.7	11.8	946	5.2
2003	Male	64.3	33.3	2.4	1,349	3.1
	Female	48.4	43.0	8.2	1,065	4.6
2004	Male	62.9	33.9	7.9	1,332	3.2
	Female	48.4	43.7	3.2	1,177	4.3
2005	Male	57.1	40.1	2.8	1,267	3.4
	Female	44.7	47.8	7.6	898	4.5
2006	Male	58.8	38.7	2.5	1,421	3.4
	Female	44.8	47.0	8.2	1,258	4.6
2007	Male	61.0	36.6	2.3	1,367	3.3
	Female	42.0	48.3	9.7	1,135	4.8
2008	Male	58.1	38.5	3.4	1,456	3.6
	Female	42.9	49.0	8.0	1,169	4.7
2009	Male	59.6	38.4	2.0	1,794	3.3
	Female	45.6	47.2	7.3	1,523	4.4
2010	Male	68.5	30.0	1.4	2,144	2.9
	Female	50.0	42.1	7.9	2,190	4.3
2011	Male	61.4	34.6	4.0	1,882	3.4
	Female	42.2	47.1	10.8	1,786	5.0
2012	Male	70.7	27.3	2.1	2,984	3.0
	Female	49.0	41.5	9.6	2,171	4.5
2013	Male	60.0	36.4	3.6	1,884	3.4
	Female	42.5	46.2	11.3	1,753	4.9

Table 3. Modeled bear population estimates by management zone, 1988-2015. Estimates are for fall, pre-hunt populations and include adults, yearlings, and cubs.

Year	Bear Management Zone				State
	A	B	C	D	
1988	3,700	1,700	850	3,000	9,250
1989	3,700	1,900	950	3,200	9,750
1990	3,900	2,000	1,100	3,500	10,500
1991	4,100	2,100	1,150	3,800	11,150
1992	4,300	2,300	1,300	4,200	12,100
1993	4,400	2,400	1,400	4,600	12,800
1994	4,800	2,600	1,500	5,200	14,100
1995	5,300	2,800	1,650	5,700	15,450
1996	6,000	2,900	1,800	6,000	16,700
1997	6,300	3,000	1,950	6,100	17,350
1998	6,700	3,200	2,150	6,300	18,350
1999	6,600	3,300	2,350	6,200	18,450
2000	6,600	3,600	2,600	6,100	18,900
2001	6,500	3,800	2,900	5,800	19,000
2002	6,400	4,000	3,200	5,800	19,400
2003	6,600	4,300	3,650	5,800	20,350
2004	6,700	4,600	4,000	5,700	21,000
2005	7,000	4,700	4,300	5,800	21,800
2006	7,400	5,000	4,650	6,100	23,150
2007	7,800	5,200	4,850	6,300	24,150
2008	8,200	5,600	5,250	6,800	25,850
2009	8,600	5,800	5,650	7,500	27,550
2010	8,600	5,800	6,050	8,000	28,450
2011	7,700	5,700	6,400	8,200	28,000
2012	7,300	5,400	6,950	8,600	28,250
2013	6,300	5,200	7,500	8,900	27,900
2014	6,000	5,500	7,850	9,200	28,550
2015	5,700	5,500	8,450	9,200	28,850