

Black Bears

Randy Cross, Wildlife Biologist



474 pound black bear shot by Randy Davis in 2010 while being guided by Nate Theriault of OMM Outfitters in Eagle Lake, ME

Maine has an abundant and increasing population of black bears. The public's perception of bears in Maine has an interesting history.

They were killed as vermin through early settlement, as the settlers sought to reduce competition for their agricultural gains. In fact, the state offered a bounty on bears until 1957. Bears were classified as a big game animal in 1969, and a limit of one bear per person per year was initiated. Since then, bear hunting has gained popularity to where now bears are considered a prized game animal, and the season had to be shortened to protect the resource. Careful management, along with other factors, has allowed our bear population to grow to its highest level since we began monitoring the population with modern techniques.

Despite the success in turning bears from vermin to a prized game animal, bear hunting hasn't caught on among most resident hunters. Currently less than 5,000 bear hunters are Maine residents. There are likely several reasons for the low interest in bear hunting among residents. One possible reason may be the lack of a bear hunting tradition and little knowledge of bear behavior. There is also the persistent misperception that the meat from bears is not good eating. Finally, most people live in the portion of the state that has few bears, making it necessary to travel and hunt in areas of the state that may be less familiar to the average hunter. While bear hunting may seem mysterious to a hunter who is new to it, it can be quite simple and inexpensive. Also, Maine has many excellent guides who offer bear hunting at reasonable prices if one is interested in a catered hunt. There are many who can offer tips on how to get started if you are interested in a do-it-yourself hunt.

The myth that bears provide poor table fare probably took root generations ago when refrigeration was not readily available. Bear meat spoils rapidly if not cooled quickly. Now, a harvested bear can be cooled down with ice after being dressed out or taken quickly to a meat processor, either of which is essential for preserving the quality of

the meat for eating. The best advice is to get the bear dressed out, iced, and in refrigeration within hours of being harvested. Most people are amazed at the lack of “gaminess” of bear meat that has been handled in this way.

The final obstacle to hunting bears (lack of bears near home) is slowly improving over time. Bears are making progress colonizing more of the suitable habitat in the state where they were eliminated years ago. Most people in Maine can access good numbers of bear within an hour drive from home. Due to conflicts with bears, many landowners in rural areas are happy to allow bear hunters on their property. Contact your local game warden or regional wildlife biologist for advice on good areas to hunt near home.

We are very fortunate to have this healthy and abundant big game resource and a wide range of opportunity to pursue it. So, talk to your hunting buddies and consider a bear hunt in Maine this fall.

