

PROTECT BLACK BEARS

After a long absence from Iowa¹, the black bear has begun repopulating the state. Northeast Iowa has habitat that favors black bear, as well as eastern and southern Iowa. The black bear currently has no protection from hunting, so any black bear found in Iowa can legally be killed.

In order to allow the black bear to continue expanding in Iowa, the black bear must be protected from hunting pressure. The way to accomplish this is to add the black bear to the furbearer list, Iowa Code Section 481A.1(20).² Initially the black bear can be given a closed season. Once the population expands, a sustainable hunting season can be established.

Black bear are not common, but are spotted in Iowa almost every year. Between 2002 and 2021, there were 43 confirmed bear in Iowa.³ According to Jeff Harrison, Conservation Officer with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources, “In the last five years, we’re probably receiving two to three reports a year now, whereas 10 years ago maybe once every two years”.⁴ Black bear live in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Missouri, and South Dakota so it is not surprising that bear periodically make their way into Iowa.

A black bear was spotted in Dubuque County in 2023 and 2024.⁵ A black bear was shot near Spillville in 2022; it is believed that the bear had been spotted in other parts of Winneshiek County.⁶ In 2020, a black bear spent some of the spring and summer in Clinton and Scott Counties.⁷ In 2017, black bear sightings were reported in Poweshiek County and in Mahaska County.⁸ In 2016, a black bear was struck on a highway in Allamakee County, in northeast Iowa.⁹ In the spring of 2015, tracks of a black bear were identified on the south side of Dubuque¹⁰. Iowa Department of Natural Resources believe the bear entered Iowa from Minnesota or Wisconsin.¹¹ In the summer of 2014 a female black bear and two cubs were observed in Clayton County. A young male was also spotted.¹²

Black bears are shy and timid and do not attack humans to protect their territory or cubs. Startled black bears will run away and often climb a nearby tree. Although beekeepers have expressed concerns about the black bear, the beehives can be surrounded by electric fences which will keep the bears at bay.

The Iowa Chapter supports placing the black bear on the furbearer list.

¹ The black bear was extirpated from Iowa by over-hunting in the mid 1800’s. For more information, see [A Country So Full of Game](#) by James J. Dinsmore, University of Iowa Press, 1994, pages 50 to 56.

² Alternatively the black bear can be added to the list of game animals in Section 481A.48.

³ “Midwest black bear population likely to expand into parts of Iowa in the not too distant future”, Iowa DNR News: Conservation and Recreation, May 11, 2021

⁴ Associated Press, “DNR officials: Stop bugging bear roaming through Iowa cornfield”, Cedar Rapids Gazette, June 18, 2020

⁵ Kate Kealey, “A bear was spotted in Dubuque, Iowa. Is this the first time it has happened?”, Des Moines Register, June 14, 2024

⁶ “Black bear sightings increase in northeast Iowa”, Decorah News, June 3, 2022

⁷ Sarah Kay LeBlanc, “‘Loving it to death’: Iowa DNR tells people to stay away from black bear”, Des Moines Register, June 7, 2020

⁸ “Black bear spotted in Iowa again”, KCCI, September 13, 2017

⁹ “Black Bear Killed on Allamakee County Highway”, June 27, 2016, Iowa Department of Natural Resources news release

¹⁰ Headlines from CBS 2/FOX 28, Corridor Business Journal, May 26, 2015

¹¹ “Black Bears in the Upper Midwest and Iowa”, flyer available from the Iowa Department of Natural Resources

¹² Orlan Love, “Time to consider Iowa as bear habitat?”, Cedar Rapids Gazette, August 7, 2014



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