

1999 FLORIDA STATUS REPORT

THOMAS H. EASON, Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission, 620 S. Meridian St., Tallahassee, FL 32399-1600

INTRODUCTION

Black bear populations are relatively stable throughout Florida. Some small populations (Chassahowitzka and Glades/Highlands) may be insecure, but core populations (Appalachicola, Big Cypress, Eglin, Ocala/St. Johns, and Osceola) remain intact. Work continues on updating the range map for bears in Florida and will rely on interviews with regional biologists and law enforcement officers.

On 2 December 1998, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) declined to list the Florida black bear as threatened or endangered. Instead, they sighted larger than previously known population levels and projected habitat availability as being sufficient to perpetuate the subspecies into the foreseeable future. Defenders of Wildlife and the Sierra Club are currently suing the USFWS to force them to reverse their decision.

Two new personnel have joined the Bear Management Section of the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission (GFC). Thomas Eason was recently hired as the Section Leader and Walt McCown has been transferred into the section as a wildlife biologist. In June 1999, GFC will merge with the Marine Fisheries Commission and the new agency will be called the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

A new wildlife conservation license plate that depicts a bear has been approved for use in Florida. Even though none of the estimated \$2 million annual fund will be ear-marked specifically for bears, it is hoped that a portion of the money will be used for bear conservation and management.

MORTALITY

Hunting seasons for bears in Florida have been closed since 1993. Consequently, the majority of reported mortalities involve bear/vehicle collisions. During 1997 and 1998, 75 and 90 bears, respectively, were killed on roads in Florida. Each of these years was a record for roadkill and the upward trend is expected to continue (Fig. 1). In 1998, wildlife officers confirmed 11 incidents of illegally killed bears.

MANAGEMENT

The bulk of management activities continue to involve handling nuisance situations. Over the past 2 years, GFC received 744 nuisance bear complaints. As with roadkill, each of these was a record year and the increasing trend is expected to continue (Fig. 2). Currently, over 35 biologists respond to nuisance calls in some manner. Complaints are seasonal and peak in the spring (apiaries) and fall (residences).

In fall 1998, GFC sponsored a 3-day workshop on bear management issues. Participants

included stakeholders from 4 groups: hunting, agriculture, resource management, and conservation. Consensus was reached on 8 recommendations that GFC is currently incorporating into its bear management plan. Future objectives include organizing a statewide bear stakeholder committee, organizing 5-6 local stakeholder committees (focused on each major population of bears in Florida), and conducting a Request for Proposal to generate habitat management guidelines for bears in Florida.

RESEARCH

Two research projects are currently underway and 1 has recently ended in Florida. Personnel from the University of Tennessee (UT) and the University of Florida (UF) continue to investigate the population dynamics of bears in the Okefenokee/Osceola ecosystem. Large numbers of bears have been trapped and are being monitored by means of radio telemetry. The project is proceeding as planned, with final results expected in a few years. Another study, on a small population of bears in Chassahowitzka, is being conducted by researchers from the University of Kentucky. This project is focusing on the status and genetic makeup of the population. Research indicates that fewer than 20 bears reside in the area. A third study at Eglin Air Force base ended last year. Researchers from UT and UF are now analyzing the data in an attempt to generate robust abundance and density estimates for this sparse population.

Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission is in the process of receiving funds from Florida Department of Transportation to investigate the influence of State Road 40 on the movements and behavior of bears in Ocala National Forest. Fieldwork for this 2-year project should begin in April or May, 1999.

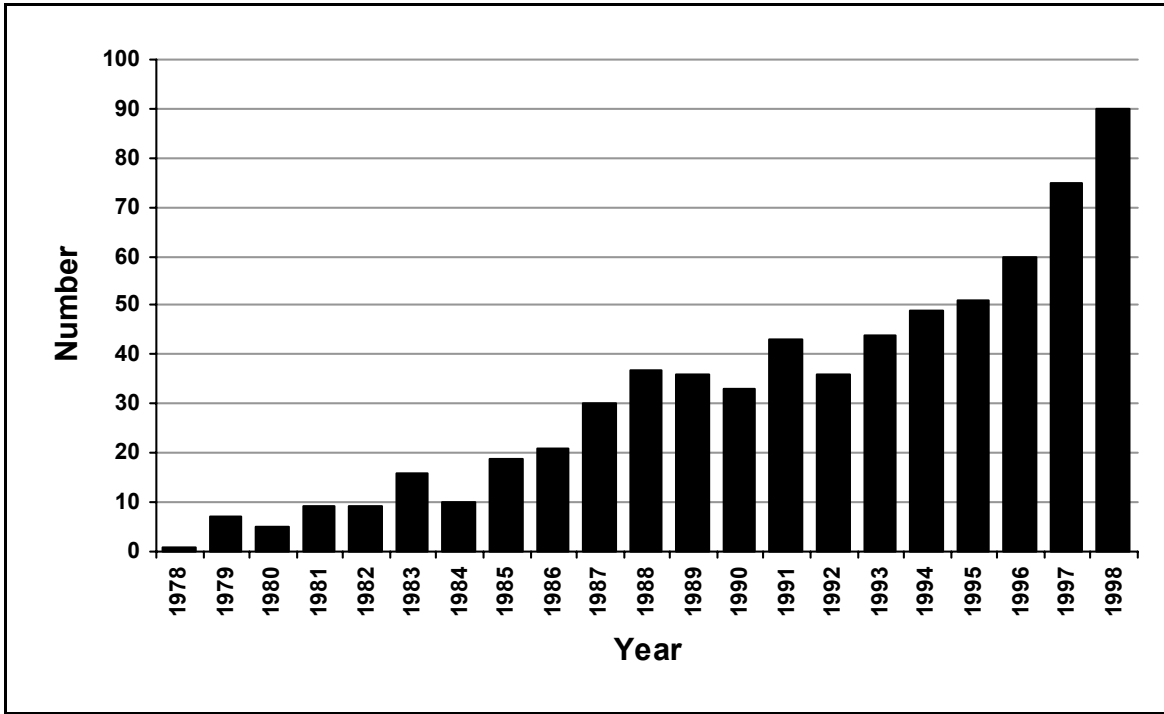


Fig. 1. Number of roadkill bears in Florida.

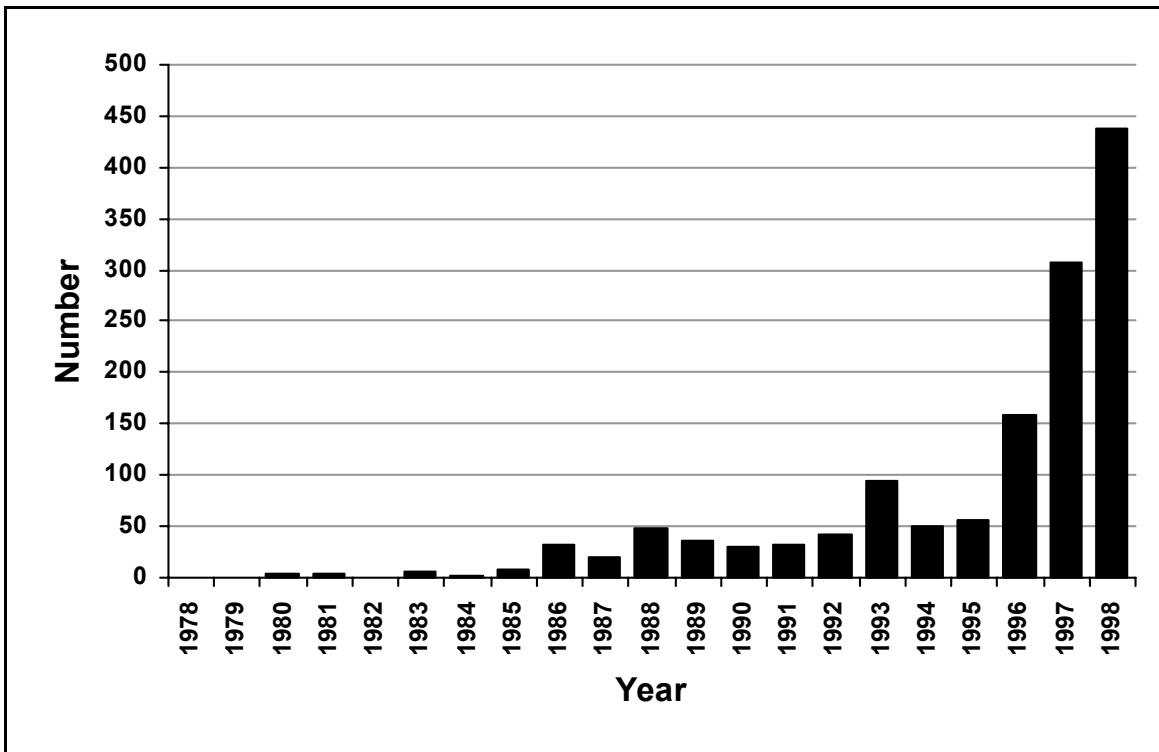


Fig. 2. Number of bear nuisance complaints in Florida.