



LISA BROWNWATER

Black bear

BEAR TRACKS

An expanding population

By Candy Thomson

Harry Spiker bumps along a back road in a white pick-up truck on his way to deliver a message from Maryland's bear capital to the state's most populous county.

"The bear population is expanding," says Spiker, DNR's top bear biologist. "It's like a wave moving across the state from west to east. The crest of the wave is in Allegany County. The front edge of the wave is in Montgomery County."

If Montgomery County is at the wave's leading edge, the residents of Poolesville — Spiker's destination — already are feeling the spray.

He's visiting the town of 5,000 at the invitation of local civic and government leaders who want to know more about *Ursus americanus*, Maryland's largest mammal.

A community's concerns

"How can we live in our community and in the natural world?" asks Joe Snider,

president of the Bethesda-Chevy Chase chapter of the Izaak Walton League of America, a conservation group.

With lush vegetation, hidden stream corridors and vast, undisturbed tracts of land, Poolesville and its surroundings are a haven for bears looking for new territory to claim.

Area residents are sure they have at least one black bear as a neighbor. Based on sightings that began in February and anecdotal evidence, Spiker agrees.

"If one bear found its way, others will, too," he says to his audience of more than 30 people.

Valeree Dickerson, a town commissioner, sums up local sentiment.

"There's a percentage of people freaking out and there are others who are enjoying the experience," she tells Spiker. "Some people are afraid that bears are going to eat their children."

Spiker nods. He has heard the stories

before. And after years of managing Maryland's bear population, he already has a game plan.

"We experienced this in Garrett County 20 years ago and we didn't know then what we know now," he says. "We know how bears move across the terrain and we know how people react to them."

The answer, he says, is in the hands of the humans.

Reversing endangerment

With confirmed sightings in 14 counties, Maryland's black bear population has rebounded since its near extinction triggered a hunting moratorium that ran from 1953 to 2004.

Large-scale timber cutting and the arrival of development took its toll on not only bears, but also deer and turkeys.

By the 1970s, the black bear home territory was a tiny sliver of Garrett and Allegany counties near the Potomac



Biologists weigh, measure and take blood samples from a tracked sow.

River. In 1972, the state put bruins on its endangered species list.

But modern wildlife management and land planning practices changed things for the better. Biologists logged bear sightings and employed radio collars to track the movement of females, also known as sows.

By 1991, the estimated population was 79 bears, or 12 to every 100 square miles.

Population studies

With the species on the rebound, state biologists began preparing a black bear management plan to ensure the population continued its measured and measurable growth. With the help of concerned citizens, they produced a 10-year plan that staked out research goals and, perhaps more importantly, began to address the inevitable conflicts between humans and bears.

When Spiker took over the program in October 2001, he was determined to build on the scientific foundation created by his predecessor, Steve Bittner, and the outreach component called for in the management plan.

“We set out to learn how bears use the land and how we could mitigate the conflicts with humans,” Spiker says.

A labor-intensive study that collected fur samples allowed scientists to research DNA. Deep in the woods, molasses-laced

stumps surrounded by a strand of barbed wire attracted bears that either ambled over or wiggled under the perimeter, leaving behind small tufts that were sent for analysis to determine the sex of the population and how the bears were related.

More sows were fitted with radio collars, which pointed biologists to their hibernation spots, where cubs could be tagged and recorded.

The hunt for balance

Spiker and his team met with farmers, homeowners and civic leaders to deal with crop damage and nuisance bears. For farmers, the answer has been a

compensation program, including proceeds from the sale of Black Bear Conservation Stamps, and a response team that chases off problem bruins. For homeowners, the key is a strong dose of preventative measures that includes securing trash cans and bird feeders.

A second task force, formed in 2002, updated the management plan and recommended something not seen in Maryland in a half-century: a bear hunt.

The recommendation was fought in the halls of Annapolis and the court of public opinion. The matter ultimately was decided in a Prince George’s County



2015 Stamp contest winner

The Black Bear Conservation Stamp Program generates funds used to compensate farmers for crop damage caused by bears.

courtroom, where a judge ruled in favor of DNR and its proposed hunt.

The first hunt in 2004 lasted one day, resulting in the harvest of 20 bears, all but one of them in Garrett County. Each year, the event has attracted more hunters.

Peaceful coexistence

All the while, the population in Maryland's two western counties has grown from 27.3 bears per 100 square miles in 2000 to 39.3 bears in 2009 to 64.5 bears in 2011. Given the size of a bear's territory (10 square miles for females and 25-50 miles for males), the need for more room is propelling the migration wave east.

Last summer, people reported bears in downtown Rockville and on the campus of the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda. So far in 2015, there have been sightings in Frederick and in Gaithersburg in addition to Poolesville.

Ken D'Loughy, DNR's wildlife manager for the central region, says Montgomery County has "excellent habitat" to support bears and lots of humans who inadvertently invite them to stay by not securing trash cans and taking down bird feeders at night.

"We are tracking sightings on Google maps," he says. "The bears are using parks and stream beds to travel to neighborhoods

to forage at night. Once you remove the food source, they have no reason to stay."

Bear necessities

Spiker says bears are perfectly willing to share space with people and adapt to their habits. For example, one sow in Garrett County fitted with a radio collar in 2001 has given birth to well over 20 cubs and has remained in its home range despite development springing up around it.

People in Garrett County have gotten the message. Nuisance complaints are down considerably. More Marylanders will have to alter their behavior as well.

The tipping point for Montgomery County will be when sows decide to stay and have cubs, creating an established population.

Then, the wave will move on. To the reservoirs of Baltimore County. To the woods along the Patuxent River in Anne Arundel County. To the Eastern Shore.

And so will DNR's outreach.

"We have this preconceived notion of what bears are," says Spiker. "We have a teddy bear when we're young and we watch Winnie the Pooh. I'm here to tell you there aren't good bears. There aren't bad bears. Bears are just bears. Our message is we can co-exist with these critters." ■

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Candy Thomson is the Maryland Natural Resources Police Public Information Officer.

This past March, while tagging cubs during annual surveys in Western Maryland, DNR biologists found a single litter of five black bear cubs nested in a tree with the sow. Litters this large have been documented in other states in North America, but this marks the first recorded occurrence in Maryland, where the average litter size is three.



The cubs receive ear tags and tracking devices.



DNR biologists pose with the five cubs.



Bear cub close-up

STEPHEN BADGER