# Hunting the Black Bear in New York

New York State Department of Environmental Conservation

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The black bear is the most challenging of New York's big game mammals. Bear hunting is an arduous task requiring patience, persistence and hard work. Each fall, New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) wildlife staff across the state receive inquiries from interested hunters about black bear hunting opportunities and about techniques for hunting and handling a harvested bear in the field.

## Hunting Regulations

New York provides hunters with nearly three months of bear hunting opportunity, including early, bowhunting, muzzleloading, and regular seasons. New York is divided into two hunting zones for big game: The Northern Zone and the Southern Zone. Each zone is further divided into Wildlife Management Units (WMUs) which can have different hunting regulations. In general, bears may be hunted in the Northern Zone starting with the early season in mid-September and continuing through early December. In the Southern Zone, bears can be taken beginning with the bowhunting season in October and continuing through mid-December. There is no bear hunting on Long Island.

**Hunting regulations can change from one year to the next, so be sure the check the current New York Hunting and Trapping Guide for season dates, open areas, and other regulations. The Guide is usually available in mid-August from any New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) Regional Office, at license issuing agents, or on the DEC website: www.dec.ny.gov.**

Some of the more pertinent bear hunting regulations are listed here:

- Bears may be hunted from sunrise to sunset.
- Hunting black bears with the use of bait or dogs is not permitted in New York State.
- Hunters may carry and use up to 1.5 fluid ounces of a liquid scent or lure.
- In the Southern Zone, hunters may not shoot a cub, shoot any bear from a group of bears, or shoot or take a bear from its den.
- Legal hunting implements vary according to the Zone (Northern or Southern) and the season. The following table shows the legal implements by zone and season.

| | Northern Zone | Southern Zone |
|---|---|---|
| **Early Season** | Bow, Muzzleloader, Handgun, Shotgun, Rifle | Not Applicable |
| **Bowhunting Season** | Bow only | Bow only |
| **Muzzleloading Season** | Muzzleloader only | Muzzleloader only |
| **Regular Season** | Bow, Muzzleloader, Handgun, Shotgun, Rifle | Bow, Muzzleloader, Handgun, Shotgun, Rifle* |

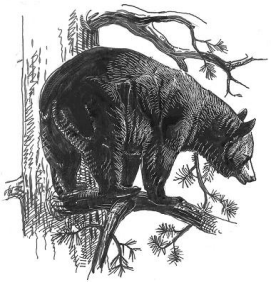
* Rifles are not legal implements for big game hunting in some counties or parts of counties in the Southern Zone - see the current Hunting and Trapping Guide for a map of these areas.

- **Implement Descriptions:**

  **Bow** - Long (stick), recurve or compound bow with a draw weight of greater than 35 pounds. A legal arrow is nonbarbed, has 2 or more cutting edges, and is at least 7/8 inch wide.
  **Muzzleloader** - Firearm loaded through the muzzle, a minimum bore of .44 inches, and shooting a single projectile. Scopes and fiber optic sights may be used at any time. To hunt with a muzzleloading pistol you must have a New York State Pistol License.
  **Handgun** - Any centerfire pistol or revolver. Barrel length may not exceed 16 inches. To hunt with a handgun you must have a New York State Pistol License.
  **Shotgun -** Must be 20 gauge or larger and fire a single projectile. Rifling in the barrel or choke is allowed.
  **Rifle** - Any centerfire rifle.

  It is illegal to hunt with:
  - a fully automatic firearm;
  - a semi-automatic or autoloading firearm that holds more than 6 shells (except an autoloading pistol with a barrel length under 8 inches);
  - any firearm equipped with a silencer.

- **License Requirements:**
  - New York Residents must have any license with big game privileges, and a bear tag. To hunt during the archery or muzzleloading seasons, you must purchase the respective privilege.
  - Non-residents must purchase a big game, super sportsmen, bowhunting, or muzzleloading license, plus a non-resident bear tag. To hunt during the archery or muzzleloading seasons, you must purchase the respective non-resident license plus a bear tag.



## Bear Statistics

New York State harbors one of the largest bear populations in the eastern United States. DEC monitors several indices of the bear populations, such as bear harvest, non-hunting mortality and nuisance complaints to determine population trends. Our bear populations have been increasing in recent years, especially in southern New York.

Adult male bears typically average about 300 pounds while adult females average about 150 pounds. Every year hunters report taking several bears that exceed 500 pounds. The heaviest bear recorded in New York weighed 660 pounds dressed (estimated live weight of 750 pounds) and was taken in 1975 in Franklin County.

Black bears are aged by cutting a cross section of a small premolar tooth and counting the cementum annuli (annual rings), similar to the technique used by foresters to determine the age of trees. The oldest wild bear ever aged in New York was 41¾ years, taken in 1974 during the regular big game season in Essex County, Town of Newcomb. The average age of bears killed by hunters is 4¾ years, and more than 70 percent of the bears taken are 2¾ years and older. If you are successful, you or your taxidermist will be asked to provide DEC with a portion of the bear's lower jaw or a premolar tooth. All hunters who cooperate are sent a letter informing them of their bear's age.

## General Preparation for Bear Hunting

Bear hunting is a physically demanding activity, especially removing a harvested bear from the woods. Hunters should begin a fitness program well before bear hunting season. Fall weather conditions in New York are unpredictable. Temperatures in September may range from below freezing to 80°F, and in late November and early December usually range from 0°to 40°F. Snow can be expected from mid October to the end of the season. A word to the wise: come prepared for just about any kind of weather.

A couple of weekends during the summer or early fall would be an excellent time to locate a hunting area and familiarize yourself with the terrain. You might also combine these trips with some late season fishing and scouting prospects for deer hunting. Topographical maps are highly recommended for becoming familiar with an area. If you don't have time to scout an area you may wish to hire the services of a professional big game guide. A list of guides is available from the New York State Outdoor Guides Association: www.nysoga.org, or 866-469-7642.

Information on lodging and restaurants is available through local Chambers of Commerce and internet searches. In addition, several state and private campsites remain open until the end of the big game season. If you will be camping on state forest preserve land, a camping permit is required if the camp is to remain for longer than three days. These permits are free and can be obtained from the local forest ranger. See www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/camping.html for information about camping on DEC lands.

Preseason planning is important and should include reviewing information on food habits and natural sign. The more you know about black bears and the area you will be hunting, the better your chances will be for a successful hunt. Be sure to review the historical bear harvest statistics available on the DEC website (www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/42232.html) and focus your hunting on towns and WMU's that have traditionally had good bear takes.

## Food Habits

**Did You Know?**

Adult male and female bears only tolerate each other during breeding season.

Black bears are omnivores, dieting on various and even unusual plant and animal materials. Bears are also opportunists, choosing the foods that are easiest to obtain in quantity. A successful bear hunter recognizes that food availability changes from one year to the next, and also during the bear hunting season.

In New York, bears emerge from their dens in late March or early April depending on snow cover, weather conditions and individual habits. After leaving the den, bears use their well-developed sense of smell to find carcasses of winter-killed animals such as deer. Later in spring when the earth warms and plants begin to sprout, ferns, skunk cabbage, marsh marigold, and grasses make up most of their diet. In early summer bears look for grubs, ants and other insects, as well as green vegetation. During the summer months bears begin to feast on blueberries, raspberries, and blackberries as they become available.

In late summer and early fall bears eat assorted berries, jewelweed, choke cherries, black cherries, wild apples, beechnuts, acorns, and crops such as corn. Beechnuts, black cherries and acorns are commonly referred to as “hard mast foods.” The quantity, quality and distribution of these foods vary tremendously from year to year. Places where food is abundant, such as stands of mast producing trees, will often attract bears from surrounding areas. If possible visit the hardwood ridges in your hunting area prior to your hunt to see if mast is present. Learn how to identify the mast producing tree species, and where you are likely to find them. Early season scouting may require binoculars or other means of checking the tree crowns for mast. Later in the season mast on the ground may be a clue, but rodents and other wildlife often quickly consume what was there. The presence of abundant chipmunks, bluejays, wild turkeys, and deer, and areas of disturbed leaf litter with abundant bear scat are indicators of good mast production.

Bears may den later in the season during a good mast year, unless there is deep snow cover. They also may den earlier in the fall in years with a poor mast crop.

*Acorns*

*Beechnuts*

*Black Cherries*

If you are hunting in an agricultural area, check with local farmers who may be suffering damage to their crops from bears. They may allow you to hunt near these crop fields. Corn fields are especially susceptible to damage from bears.

## Natural Sign

Black bears are found in a variety of habitats including swamps, burned and logged areas, dense hardwood and softwood forests, and agricultural areas. Bears will leave distinct trails in feeding and watering areas. These trails are often well defined near concentrated food sources such as berry patches, corn fields, or along hardwood ridges that support mast bearing trees. Natural funnels such as beaver dams, hedgerows, or ridge tops are likely areas to find bear sign.

**Did You Know?**

Black bears can run up to 35 mph for short distances.

Black bears are very capable tree climbers and claw marks are frequently found on beech, oak, and fruit trees. Black scars on trees are historic evidence of previous mast crop years. Look carefully under these nut bearing trees and you may find where bear and deer have been foraging for food.

During a good mast year bears have been known to make “nests” in these trees. The nest is a result of the animal breaking branches while eating the leaves and nuts. It does not serve as a day bed or resting site as the name implies.

During the hunting season some hunters consider the best sign to be bear droppings. Although it is difficult to determine “freshness” you may be able to discern contents which may help to determine the feeding activity of a particular bear and thus it’s feeding area. The frequency of bear droppings may also indicate the intensity of bear activity.

Black bears have five toes on each foot, with the biggest toe being on the outside (in contrast to the location of a human's big toe). The position of the big toe is what gives the black bear its shuffling gait, with the tracks turning slightly inward.

The track of the front foot of an adult black bear is about 3 ¼ - 5 ½ inches in width and 3 – 4 ½ inches in length. If the small round heel of the front foot registers in the soil, then this can add 3 - 4 inches to the length.

The hind foot track is the same width as the front track, but the length is approximately 6 - 7.75 inches due to the large heel pad usually showing.

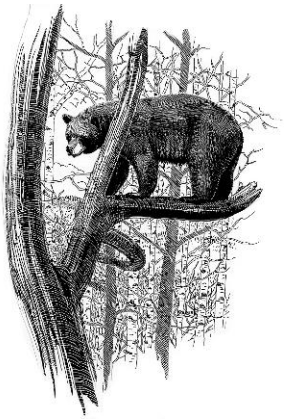
*Right front foot print of a black bear.*

## Hunting Methods

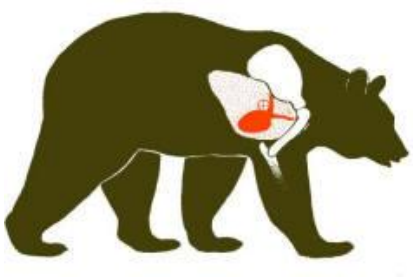
Hunting methods for bear that are legal in New York include still hunting, tracking, organized drives, and stand hunting. When using any of these methods your chances of success will be much greater if you find a favorable feeding area or travel corridor and concentrate your hunting in that area.

A bear's eyesight is only average; however, its senses of smell and hearing are acutely developed, so you must pay attention to wind direction at all times. Pick a stand location or stillhunt downwind of the place you expect a bear to move through. Bears are most active at dawn and dusk, so these are the best times for stand and still hunting.

During the middle of the day you might want to try tracking a bear if there is snow on the ground and you find a fresh track. Drives that are set up to chase bears out of heavy cover or wetlands may also be effective during the day when bears are likely to be bedded down. Large groups of hunters sometimes have good success driving an entire mountainside or large swamp.



If you get a chance to shoot a bear, make sure you can get a clean killing shot at its vital area. The long black hair of a bear makes it more difficult to pick out the vital area with your scope or sights. The best shot placement is in the chest cavity just behind the front leg, where the heart and lungs are located. If the bear is walking, wait until the front leg closest to you is forward so the leg bones don't obstruct the vital organs – see the illustration below. Bears sometimes do not leave an obvious blood trail when shot because their thick hair absorbs a lot of blood, and tracks of a running bear are hard to follow except in snow. Anything but a direct hit in the vital area could result in a long day of tracking or possibly never recovering a mortally wounded bear. It is therefore better to pass up a shot if you are not sure of a vital hit.



## Selecting Your Bear

Experienced hunters and biologists agree on one thing; it can be very difficult to estimate the size of bears. We often are limited to only distinguishing between adults and cubs, and even that distinction can sometimes be difficult. In the Northern Zone, it is typically easier to tell a cub from an adult due to a more obvious size difference. In the Southern Zone, where food supplies are more plentiful, a male cub can be larger than a yearling female. Remember that the taking of cubs or a bear from among a group of bears is prohibited in the Southern Zone. The responsibility rests with the hunter to be able to estimate size and distinguish cubs from adults. Although there are no hard and fast rules, there are a few techniques that you can employ to estimate the size of a bear and whether or not it is a cub:

1. Cubs and younger bears have big ears in relation to their heads. If the ears look big, then the bear is small. Also, the ears are closer together on young and small bears
2. Mature bears, especially males, have a large blocky head. The head tends to resemble a basketball on top of the shoulders. If the head is smaller with slight or pointed features, it is likely a younger bear.

*Mature*

*Younger*

*Mature*

*Younger*

3. A mature bear has a belly that droops down, and causes it to walk with a swagger.
4. If you see a bear, it is best to observe it for a while before deciding to take a shot. If the bear is a sow with cubs, you will see and/or hear them before too long.
5. Bear hierarchy is based on size. Smaller bears will often approach warily, periodically looking around for larger bears. Alternatively, larger bears tend to travel with a purpose and may appear oblivious to their surroundings.

## Proper Care of a Bear Carcass

After killing the bear, it is important to field dress it as quickly as possible. Like most meat, the taste will depend on the care given just after death. Also remember to fill out your carcass tag immediately after taking a bear, and attach it to the carcass as soon as you reach camp, home, or vehicle.

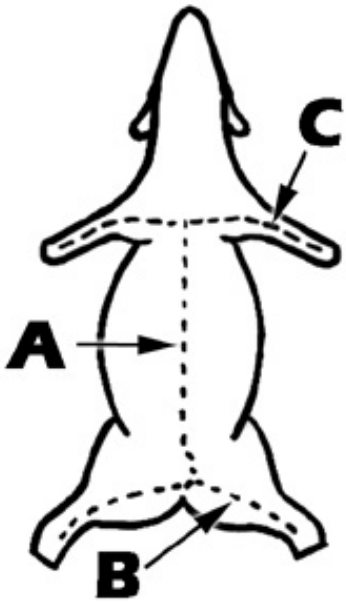
Field dressing a bear is essentially the same as field dressing a deer. Turn the bear on its back and cut a circle around the anal opening, freeing it and the intestinal tube. Next, insert the point of the knife just below the end of the breast plate, pointing toward the anus. Slit the belly wall from chest to the genitals, being careful not to puncture the stomach or intestines. Roll the bear on its side and pull the stomach, intestines and anus out of the body cavity. Then cut through the diaphragm in the chest close to the ribs, freeing the lungs and heart. Cut the windpipe and esophagus, and pull them out together with the liver and entrails attached. Next, turn the bear on its stomach to drain the blood. After a few minutes, roll the bear on its back and prop open the body cavity with a short stick to allow air circulation to cool it. There is really no need to slit the chest and, in fact, in doing so you will allow dirt, leaves and other debris to spoil parts of the meat.

If you don't have other members of your hunting party to help, you may want to go for assistance. Dragging even a small bear out of the woods is a chore. In fact, if you are several miles in the woods you may want to skin and quarter the animal and make a couple of trips backpacking the animal out.

Upon reaching camp or home, try to hang the animal by the front legs, and prop the body cavity open to let it cool. Do not hang the bear by the hind feet, because blood will drain to the chest cavity, collect there and sour, thus spoiling the meat. Keep the carcass out of direct sunlight and away from heat sources, and keep it as cool as possible.

It is not necessary to hang a bear for several days. In fact, there are good reasons to skin and cool the bear as soon as possible. First, black bears are thick skinned and usually heavily furred. The fur and hide will retard heat loss. Second, the fur is black which can absorb heat, especially from sunlight. Third, the fat on a bear is similar to that of a pig. Unlike deer or sheep tallow, bear fat has the capability of spoiling quickly. Even in freezing weather a bear can spoil by being exposed to sunlight.

## Skinning




Preserving the head and hide is your decision and depends largely on your preference and financial resources. You may want to have the head mounted, hide tanned, a rug made or a combination of these. Regardless of how you want the head or hide of your bear preserved, the bear should be skinned as soon as possible to allow the carcass to cool rapidly. If you don't feel confident skinning the bear yourself, most taxidermists will skin it for you.

If the bear is hanging, take it down and place it on a clean floor or tarp. Position the animal on its back. Extend each end of the incision made while field dressing the bear, to a point between the two front legs, and to within three or four inches of the anal opening (A). Next make straight cuts from the ends of the first cut to the pads of all four feet (B & C). Now that you have performed all of the necessary cuts, you may begin to carefully remove the skin from the carcass. It will be necessary to cut through the ankle joints of each paw to be able to get the skin off the body. Start with the rear paws, then the tail, and work the skin forward toward the head. It is best to leave additional fat on the skin rather than risk cutting the hide. Most taxidermists prefer the skull, feet and tail be left intact and attached to the skin so they can make the best mount.

## Care of the Hide

It is extremely important to get the skin to the taxidermist as soon as possible. After skinning, roll the hide and freeze it until you can get it to a taxidermist. Never place a hide in a plastic bag without some means of refrigeration. The plastic bag will not allow heat transfer and will result in tissue and fur deterioration. Salting should only be done when refrigeration is not available and only after all fat has been removed. Salting is only recommended for experienced bear skinners in the most unusual circumstances. Remember, a taxidermist is in the business to preserve your trophy.

## Butchering

The procedures for butchering a hog can be applied for a bear. It is recommended that bears be butchered primarily as roasts, chops and sausage. If the carcass weight is under one hundred pounds, then sever each quarter and use as roasts. For heavier bears, these may be further cut up into roasts of the size you desire. If this is the case, it is often better to bone it out and tie the roast. Next, bone out the strip of meat along the backbone above the ribs. This rib eye may be three to six inches wide and eighteen inches to three feet long. You can either slice the strip or roll it to be tied into a roast. Meat from the neck, lower legs and ribs should be gathered and ground for sausage. The heart and liver are delicious, but tend to be slightly stronger flavored than deer heart or liver.

**Did You Know?**

While breeding occurs in June and July, the fertilized eggs of the female do not begin to develop until autumn. This delayed implantation occurs so that the cubs are born when their chances of survival are greatest, while in the den

## Cooking

Because of the possibility of trichinosis, bear meat should be treated with the same precaution as pork. The incidence of trichinosis in bear is less than two percent in New York, and with proper precautions, there should be no more concern for this disease than there is when eating pork. Trichina larvae are killed by two techniques - cooking and freezing. Minimum internal cooking temperature is 137°F. Maximum freezing temperature is 5°F for 20 days. In preparing bear meat for the table, it is important to remove as much fat as possible. Many hunters use the fat as suet in a bird feeder. When the above precautions are followed and the meat is prepared as outlined in the butchering section, bear meat can be treated as you would any good quality domestic meat.

Oven roasting or pot roasting is recommended for most cuts. Sausage or burger can be used in a variety of recipes as long as it is well cooked. Most hunters have favorite recipes for the game they take. Try a recipe that you use on pork or venison. If you are a novice hunter or cook, there are many books available on cooking wild game.

## Bear Hunter's Ethic

We are very fortunate to have sufficient black bear habitat capable of supporting a huntable bear population in New York. It is important that hunting remains a wise use of this wildlife resource, but hunter behavior is just as important to the future of bear hunting in New York as the presence of bear habitat. It will be the behavior of hunters and how their behavior is perceived by the public which will dictate the future opportunities offered to bear hunters. The responsibility for ensuring that bear hunters will be welcomed rests with you and your hunting partners. Here are a few tips to keep in mind when you are in the field:

1) Practice safety continually.
2) Respect the rights of others.
3) Know and obey the Fish and Wildlife Laws.
4) Be confident and proficient with your hunting implement.
5) Thoroughly follow up on every shot taken.
6) Remind others who do not follow ethical practices that they are a detriment to hunting and wildlife management.
7) Recognize and learn the habits of black bears.
8) Remember to report your harvest, its not just the law but good management!

These suggestions will not only make your hunts more memorable and rewarding, but will leave a good impression with others. With wise use of our natural resources and good hunting behavior you will be assured of many years of good bear hunting experiences.

For more information on New York's black bears, visit the DEC website:
http://www.dec.ny.gov/animals/6960.html

***Good hunting and good luck!***

*Revised 6 /2/10*