A modern history of one of Illinois' extirpated mammals includes new possibilities: Will bears return to Illinois?

# Black Bears in Illinois

(Photo courtesy Wildlife Prairie State Park.)

Story By Joe McFarland

**Once a native mammal throughout much of Illinois, the black bear was extirpated in the Prairie State during the 19th century.**

How long has it been since black bears (*Ursus americanus*) roamed the Prairie State? Few people seem to know exactly when the last Illinois bear vanished. By most accounts, whatever populations of black bears still existed in Illinois by the mid-1800s had faded into extirpation around the time of the Civil War.

What happened to our bears? Just as today, fear probably drove European settlers to eliminate black bears—but money and unregulated hunting also contributed to their demise. In 1832, a bear hide could fetch as much as $6 in Illinois (for comparison, a deer hide might bring as little as 15 cents). Although Native Americans held bears in high spiritual and ceremonial regard, settlers to the Illinois country and fur traders rarely missed a chance to bag a bear.

According to David Prosser, a Cypress Creek National Wildlife Refuge technician living in deep southern Illinois, a 19th century forebear named Grandma Holmes delivered the final blow to Illinois' bear population—and she did it with an axe.

Family legend has it that Holmes—then a young woman with two children—buried an axe in the head of a bear behind her log cabin in Alexander County.

"I believe it was some time during the 1850's," Prosser recited. The bear was reportedly snatching a pig from behind Grandma Holmes' cabin, and Holmes really wanted that pig.

"All she could think about as she watched that bear climbing over the fence with her pig was, 'there goes our winter meat,' and so she grabbed an axe," Prosser said.

Whether or not Grandma Holmes was truly the last person to see the last of Illinois' native bears might never be

(Photo by Joe McFarland.)

**Southern Illinois has ample habitat for bears, including more than 278,500 acres of national forest.**

proved. But in the 150 years since, viable populations of wild bears simply haven't been documented in Illinois, despite the occasional report of a lone bear sighting.

Wildlife biologists point out that black bear sightings during the past few decades typically involve domesticated bears someone turned loose, or late-night pranks, or both. In 1995, southern Illinois residents followed the daily news to catch updated reports of a very tame black bear as it wandered around Hamilton and Jefferson counties. Wildlife officials, concerned about potential human conflicts, had no trouble nabbing the bear, which was far from wild (someone photographed it guzzling a Mountain Dew): A few doughnuts tossed into a large cage coaxed it back into captivity. The "Mountain Dew Bear," as it came to be known, was later sent to a nature center in the Shawnee National Forest.

Yet freak Illinois sightings of bear escapees might soon be eclipsed by sightings of legitimately "wild" bears, according to wildlife biologists. Black bear populations nationwide are expanding their ranges, and confirmed sightings of bears have now reached the Illinois border in all Missouri counties south of St. Louis. One black bear researcher in southern Illinois fully expects to see male black bears slipping

(Photo by Eric Hellgren.)

**Bears make dens in a variety of habitats, including hollow trees. Cubs remain with their mother for more than a year before dispersing.**

(Photo courtesy Wildlife Prairie State Park.)

(Photo by Eric Hellgren.)

(Photo by Joe McFarland.)

**"Bear sign" includes clawed tree trunks (left). The Mississippi River (above) is all that divides Illinois from Missouri bear populations.**

across the river and into the Shawnee National Forest within the next decade.

"The bears being reported in Missouri are coming from the Missouri Ozarks," explained Eric Hellgren, director of Southern Illinois University's Cooperative Wildlife Research Laboratory. Hellgren has plenty of bear facts, having studied black bears extensively in Texas, Mexico and the East—he once spent two years in Virginia and North Carolina's Great Dismal Swamp, tracking black bears with radio telemetry. His knowledge of how bear populations naturally expand lays groundwork for our understanding of a likely scenario in Illinois.

"The bears in the Missouri Ozarks today are all descended from 254 black bears that were moved out of Manitoba and Minnesota in the 1950s and 60s," Hellgren noted. "Prior to that, bears had been extirpated from the Ozarks, just as they had been in Illinois." And, while the transplanted bear population in the Ozarks continues to grow, a fundamental trait of bear dispersal will limit their ability to quickly settle into Illinois.

"Young males may walk 100 miles away from where they were born," Hellgren said. "But very few females will travel much more than 10 miles. Obviously, without females, new populations can't get established."

So, at the current rate of *female* black bear dispersal—perhaps a few miles every year—it would take several decades before bears could once again settle into the southern forests of Illinois.

"Once they're here, they've got everything they need," Hellgren pointed out, but quickly added, "There are not populations of bears close enough to (southern Illinois) to have a bear population in Illinois anytime soon."

Department of Natural Resources Division of Wildlife Resources Manager John Buhnerkempe said the state currently has no management provisions for bears in its wildlife code since they're still considered an extirpated species (similar to cougars and wolves). But that may change.

"I think we need to look at the biology as well as the human impacts of bears in Illinois,' Buhnerkempe said. "Bears bring their own set of issues, just as deer present their own issues, and people tend to have issues with large predators."

If the day arrives when a few female bears eventually reach Illinois and rear young, human tolerance will make or break their survival.

"Their limiting factor is people," Hellgren concluded. "It depends on people's tolerance and whether or not people want to have bears in Illinois."

**Black bears also exist north of the Illinois border, including this bear spotted earlier this summer in a back yard near Green Bay, Wisconsin.**