

LOUISIANA BLACK BEARS: AN ESA SUCCESS STORY

This is a story that began more than a century ago. It features a rough-riding U.S. president, hunts on horseback, crafty legislation, conservation-minded landowners, fair chase, endangered species, and, of course, stuffed teddy bears.

In 1973, Boone and Crockett member Lee Talbot pushed hard to get the Endangered Species Act (ESA) across the legislative finish line. Once signed into law, the ESA became a tool for conservationists to prevent species from going extinct. To date, 54 U.S. species have recovered to the point that they no longer merit the protection of the ESA.

Over time, the ESA has been criticized for imposing significant economic burdens on private landowners and rural communities. Look no further than the northern spotted owl controversy of the 1980s and '90s in the Pacific Northwest. And yet, a more recent and successful example of the ESA at work took place in an opposite corner of the U.S. The Louisiana black bear (*Ursus americanus luteolus*) is now a recovered species, and its recovery is a refreshing example of cooperative conservation.

ORIGINS OF THE TEDDY BEAR

Our story begins with U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt, co-founder of the Boone

and Crockett Club. In 1902, he traveled south to settle a border dispute between Louisiana and Mississippi. While there—as many of us are keen to do—he mixed business with pleasure and hunted black bears in the Mississippi Delta, a vast floodplain of the Mississippi River between Memphis, Tennessee, and Vicksburg, Mississippi.

During the hunt, a renowned black bear hunter and African American guide, Holt Collier, pursued a bear on horseback, lassoed it, and clubbed it with the butt of his rifle. Tying the bear to a tree, Collier wanted Roosevelt to kill the bear, as he desperately wanted the president to have a successful hunt. Upon arriving, the president refused to kill the defenseless bear. His reasons? He had made no effort to hunt the bear himself, nor was there any way for the bear to escape. The accompanying press covered the story. A political cartoon depicting the event ran in the *Washington Post*. And a shopkeeper in Brooklyn, New York, had the industrious idea to market stuffed bears and call



Roosevelt and Collier, circa 1916. TR holding the Winchester 1886 that he presented to Collier.

them Teddy's Bear. He telegraphed President Roosevelt to gain his permission to name the bear after him, and Roosevelt agreed. This event gave birth to the most famous toy in the world, as tens of millions of teddy bears are sold annually.

More importantly, President Roosevelt brought attention to a new kind of hunting in which sportsmen replaced killers. This event, often called “the most famous hunt to have taken place on American soil,” was the birth of fair chase. But it did not stop there. In the early 1900s, Roosevelt and his fellow Boone and Crockett Club members worked to end the

trade in meat, hides, and feathers. Market hunting was annihilating the fish and wildlife resources of the United States. These sportsmen realized that the young country's vast resources were finite.

THE DECLINE OF TEDDY'S BEAR

The bear that Roosevelt hunted, the Louisiana black bear, is one of 16 subspecies of *Ursus americanus*. These bruins ranged from eastern Texas through Louisiana and the southern two-thirds of Mississippi. Even though hunters like Collier and Ben Lilly made it their life's work to hunt and kill any predator

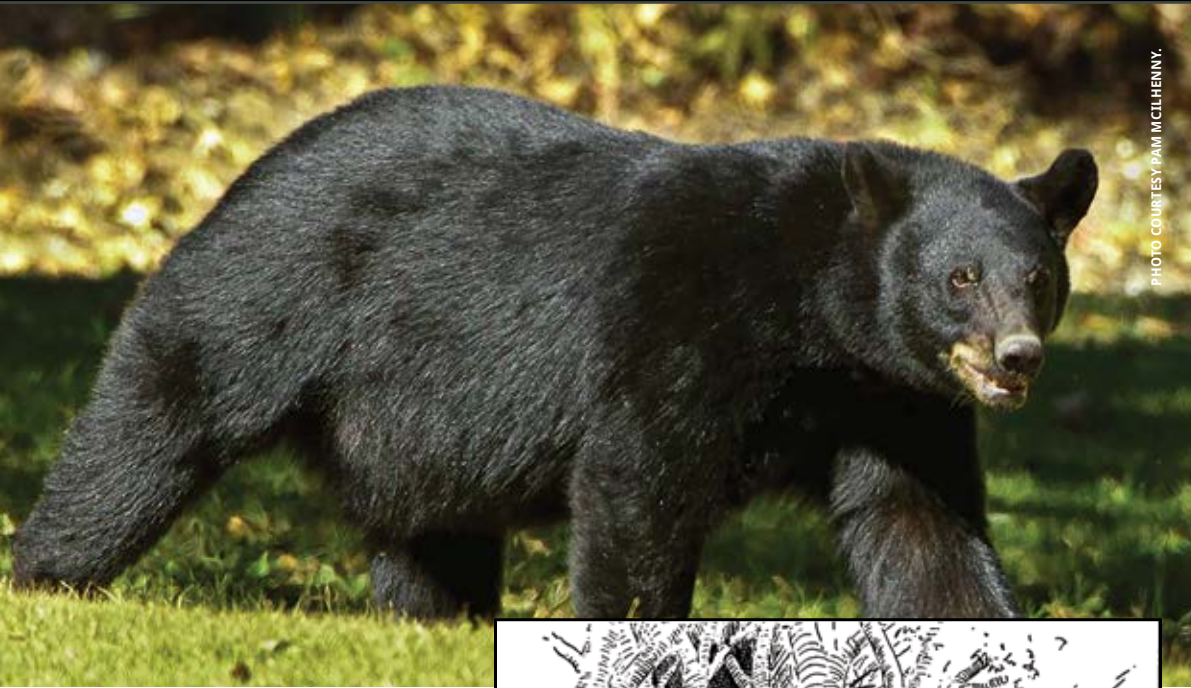


PHOTO COURTESY PAIVI MCILHENNY.

Distinguished from other black bears by possessing a skull that is longer and narrower, the Louisiana black bear is fat and happy in the bayou thanks to conservation efforts. RIGHT: The *Washington Post* ran a political cartoon depicting Roosevelt's refusal to shoot the bear.



they could find, Louisiana's black bear population was on relatively solid ground in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Seventeen parishes in the Mississippi-Atchafalaya region harbored resident bears.

By the 1950s, bear populations had become sparse. By 1986, an estimated 80-120 bears in Louisiana and around 400 bears total were thought to exist throughout their historic range. Only three known breeding subpopulations were confined to the bottomland hardwood forests of Louisiana in the Tensas and Upper and Lower Atchafalaya River Basins. The primary threats to the survival of the Louisiana black bear included habitat loss and human-related mortality.

By the 1980s, more than 80 percent of suitable habitat for the Louisiana black bear had become fragmented. The bottomland hardwood forests of the Lower Mississippi River Valley had been cleared for row crop production. Humans brought roads, homes, and towns. Bears had been pushed out, and

their numbers dwindled. Poaching and vehicle collisions also took a toll.

The Louisiana black bear was officially listed as threatened in 1992 under the ESA, and by 1995, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service had crafted a recovery plan. Key to this plan would be giving the bears suitable habitat to allow their populations to recover, which meant working with both public agencies and private landowners.

CREATING HABITAT THROUGH POLICY AND PARTNERSHIPS

The southeastern United States is not known for its copious amounts of public land. Louisiana is 89 percent private, Texas 95 percent,

The Impact Series is dedicated to showing how sportsmen, members of the Boone and Crockett Club in particular, saved the wildlife and wild places of the United States. Early members of the Boone and Crockett Club comprised the movers, shakers, and initiators of the American conservation movement. They were hunters, anglers, explorers, lawmakers, soldiers, and, above all, conservationists. These members established laws that allowed our wildlife resources to flourish. They also protected landscape-scale geologic marvels and American icons like Yellowstone, Grand Canyon, Denali, and many, many more. These members may no longer be with us, but their legacy remains. This series aims to honor their accomplishments and remind us of the good work still to do.



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and Mississippi 89 percent. If these bears were going to stand a chance at creating and maintaining viable populations, buy-in from private landowners would be paramount. That's where the Boone and Crockett Club's long-standing involvement in developing and implementing the quintennial Farm Bill comes into play.

The Farm Bill is an expansive piece of legislation that has existed since the 1930s as part of the New Deal. It was a way to help the U.S. maintain its food security in response to the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression. A major component of the Farm Bill includes paying farmers, ranchers, and private timberland owners to conduct voluntary conservation and restoration work on their land. In the case of the Louisiana black bear, programs like the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) were key to incentivizing landowners to set aside habitat. Each time the Farm Bill is authorized, the Boone and Crockett Club and its members leave a significant mark on Farm Bill policy.

WRP, known today as Wetlands Reserve Easement (WRE), gives landowners the financial resources to protect, restore, and enhance wetlands on their property. In 1992, the same year the Louisiana black bear was listed as threatened under the ESA, the USDA began implementing the WRE to restore marginal cropland and reforest the areas with native hardwoods. Key to the success of this program was the cooperation between groups like Ducks Unlimited (DU), The Nature Conservancy, and Wildlife Mississippi. James Cummins, executive director of Wildlife Mississippi and current Boone and Crockett Club president, grew up in the Mississippi Delta city of Greenville, Mississippi, the same city where Holt Collier is buried, and has worked on implementing the WRE program since it was authorized in 1991.

"The Boone and Crockett Club and its members have left a significant mark on past Farm Bill policy," Cummins says. The Club has worked to include incentives



USFWS employee Matthew McCollister holding Louisiana black bear cubs at the Tensas River NWR.

for private landowners who voluntarily enhance wildlife habitat on their property. This year, the Club is taking the lead in proposing the creation of a new Forest Conservation Easement Program and working to grow and improve the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program. "These provisions directly impact wildlife habitat and, therefore healthy game bird and big game populations," Cummins adds.

At an event celebrating 30 years of the WRE, George Dunklin, a past president of Ducks Unlimited, had

this to say about Cummins, who received DU's Conservation Excellence Award: "He has been a champion for volunteer conservation and has been a proponent of the Wetlands Reserve Program and now the Wetlands Reserve Easement since it was created in the 1990 Farm Bill." By the end of 2022, more than one million acres of bottomland hardwoods and wetland habitat had been restored in the Lower Mississippi River Valley.

In addition to private land conservation, Cummins and the Club worked with



A great egret in the Bayou Teche National Wildlife Reserve, prime Louisiana black bear habitat.

PHOTO COURTESY TOM CARLISLE.

lawmakers on both sides of the aisle to craft legislation creating the Theodore Roosevelt National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) near Onward, Mississippi, where President Roosevelt's famous bear hunt occurred in 1902. He also worked to create the Holt Collier NWR, the first and only NWR named in honor of an African American. In 2001, the Bayou Teche NWR was established to support the Louisiana black bear by restoring and managing bottomland hardwood forests, cypress-tupelo swamps, bayous, and marshes to ensure high-quality, diverse habitat. It is located in far southern Louisiana on the Cajun Coast. Since 2011, an additional 37,000 acres of land within the Louisiana black bear habitat restoration planning area has been permanently protected, according to the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries.

REMOVAL FROM THE LIST

After 25 years of conservation efforts, the USFWS proposed removing the Louisiana black bear from the list of threatened species in 2015. In their published rule, the USFWS noted that the population had grown to include four main subpopulations and additional satellite populations in Mississippi. That increase was a direct result of quality habitat on private land.

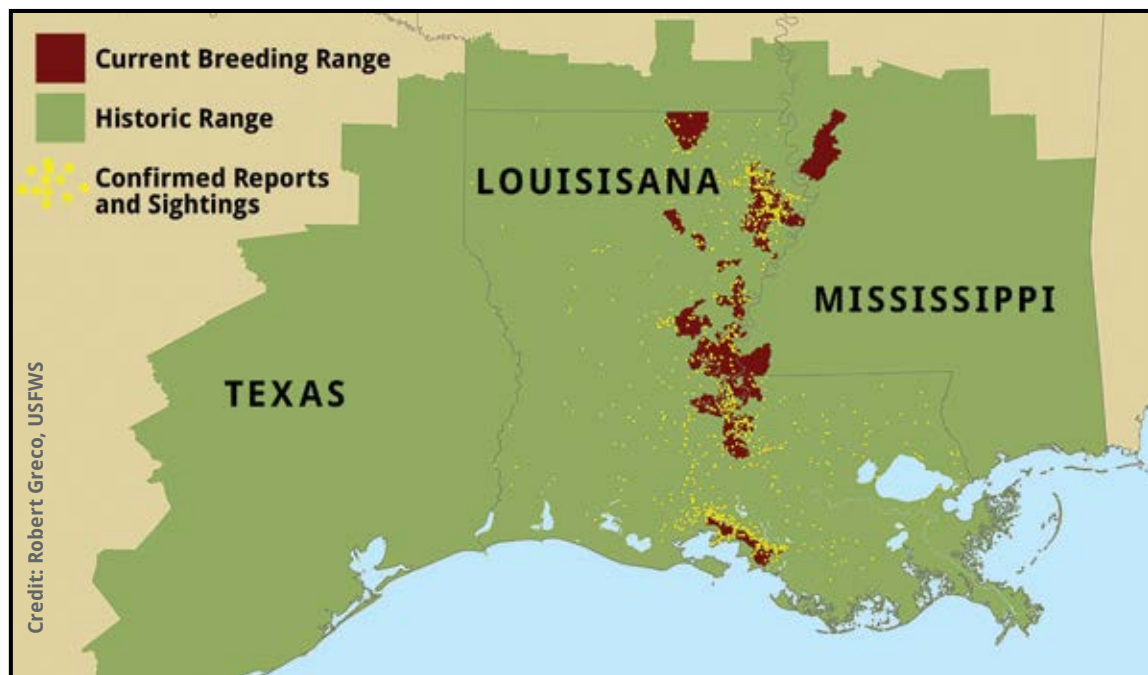
“A large proportion of habitat (an increase of over 430 percent since the time of listing) that supports breeding subpopulations and interconnects those subpopulations has been protected and restored through management on publicly owned lands, or through private landowner restoration efforts with permanent non-developmental easements,” noted the ruling.

At the time of its official delisting in 2016, Louisiana black bear populations had grown from an estimated 150 animals to 500-750 bears. Today, anywhere from 750-1,000 bears now roam the swamps and hardwood bottoms. While it inhabits just a fraction of its historic habitat, Louisiana black bear populations are considered stable. Currently, there is no hunting season for the bears, but it could be a possibility in the coming years.

In looking back on the recovery effort, John Pitre, a USDA resource conservationist, was just starting his career as a wildlife biologist in 1992. He watched as the WRE program evolved and black bear populations grew. In a 2016 article, he wrote about the recovery. “Even as the growing global population increases the demand to produce more food, fiber, and fuels on working lands, private lands conservation offers us tools to integrate wildlife-friendly practices on working lands. The Louisiana black bear is one example of how agriculture and wildlife can thrive together.” ■

“President Theodore Roosevelt would have really enjoyed why we are gathered here today,” said then U.S. Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell at a press conference announcing the delisting of the Louisiana black bear. “Working together across private and public lands with so many partners embodies the conservation ethic he stood for when he established the National Wildlife Refuge System as part of the solution to address troubling trends for the nation’s wildlife. As I said last spring when the delisting proposal was announced, the Louisiana black bear is another success story for the Endangered Species Act.”

Historic and current range of Louisiana black bear.



Credit: Robert Greco, USFWS