

## Black Bears Flourish in Big Bend

**The Borderlands Research Institute for Natural Resource Management, Sul Ross State University**

*article by Patricia Moody Harveson, Assistant Professor of Conservation Biology*

This summer, a male black bear was hit by a vehicle between Alpine and Marfa on Hwy 90. This and other black bear sightings in west Texas indicate that bears are beginning to expand farther north of their small populations in the Big Bend region of far west Texas. Their success in recolonizing the Trans-Pecos will depend on a variety of factors and is a key research focus at the Borderlands Research Institute for Natural Resource Management.

Historically, black bears ranged over most of Texas. Early records by naturalists and accounts from hunting expeditions indicate that black bears were once abundant in west Texas. However, unregulated hunting, habitat loss, and predator control led to their extirpation by 1950. In the 1980s, black bear sightings increased in Big Bend National Park, and they were listed as threatened by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. Black bears have since been naturally recolonizing west Texas, something that rarely occurs for extirpated populations. This recolonization is possible due to a number of factors, including a source black bear population in northern Mexico, intact suitable habitat, regulation and enforcement banning bear hunting and, most importantly, the willingness of private landowners to coexist with bears.

Big Bend National Park (BBNP) has a resident, reproducing black bear population, but due to its low numbers, it is still vulnerable. In 2003, adverse conditions resulted in a mass migration of black bears out of the park and into Mexico, where many of the bears died. Because of the importance of Mexico to our Texas bear population, researchers at the Borderlands Research Institute (BRI) are investigating bear movement across the border to document travel corridors essential



photo by Bonnie R. McKinney, CEMEX

*A female black bear takes refuge in an oak tree in Mexico's Carmen Mountains.*

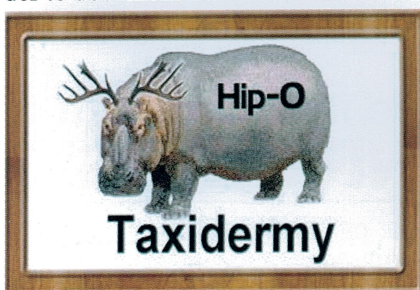
for population movement and dispersal. Black bears tend to prefer high elevation mountains such as the Chisos Basin in BBNP, but they also use the lower desert scrub habitats that occur in west Texas. Movement of bears across the border into west Texas is essential for this recolonization to continue, and research at BRI is focusing on habitat and resource availability. Researchers are using remotely activated digital cameras and radio-telemetry to locate bears and monitor trans-boundary movements.

As black bear numbers increase near the border, further expansion into other areas of west Texas is likely and evident based on recent sightings in the Davis, Glass, and Del Norte mountains. Currently, researchers at BRI are mapping suitable black bear habitat in the Trans-Pecos to identify areas that would support new populations. Population models are also being developed to address issues, such as dispersal and population viability.

Black bears are often regarded as

predators, and ranchers may worry that increases in bear numbers could lead to increased predation on livestock and wildlife. Although black bears can overcome and kill livestock and large wildlife, a recent study at Sul Ross State University showed that approximately 90 percent of a black bear's diet was plant material (primarily acorns, pinyon nuts and juniper). The remaining 10 percent of their diet was insects, and less than one percent was wildlife. Nevertheless, bear-human conflicts can still occur and should be addressed on a case-by-case basis with the removal and translocation of nuisance bears an alternative.

The natural recolonization of black bears into the Trans-Pecos is the result of effective efforts by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and private landowners to manage bears and their habitat. Bear population numbers are low, and their potential for establishing viable populations will depend on the willingness of natural resource managers and pri-



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vate landowners to coexist with bears. The success of current and future research on black bears at BRI also depends on the collaborative efforts with natural resource managers and biologists in Texas and Mexico. Current partners include wildlife biologist Bonnie McKinney, CEMEX-El Carmen Project, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, Big Bend National Park, and private landowners. 🐾



*photo courtesy of Brewster County Sheriff's Office*

*The 415-pound adult male bear was struck by a vehicle just west of Alpine this summer. Brewster County Sheriff's Deputy Chris Roach assisted with the collision investigation and helped transport the bear to a local taxidermist. The Borderlands Research Institute, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, and Hip-O Taxidermy are working to have the road-killed black bear mounted for educational purposes and displayed at the Museum of the Big Bend at Sul Ross State University.*



*photo by Jonas Delgadillo Villalobos, CEMEX*

*Who's watching whom? A radioed-collared female black bear with her cub look down on the photographer.*

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