

## 2001 FLORIDA STATUS REPORT

THOMAS H. EASON, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Bryant Building, 620 S. Meridian St., Tallahassee, FL 32399-1600

### INTRODUCTION

Black bears in Florida occur in a mosaic of 6 core, 2 remnant, and several peripheral populations that vary in size, distribution, habitat, and isolation (fig. 1). **Overall, bear populations are stable to increasing, although numbers in some local areas may be declining.** The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) lists the bear as a state threatened species throughout Florida, except in Apalachicola National Forest and Baker and Columbia counties, where bears retain no special status. Litigation regarding the federal status of the Florida subspecies continues with no indication from the courts when a ruling might be expected. Consequently, the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service's decision not to list the Florida subspecies still stands.

The Bear Management Section has doubled in size, thanks to legislative appropriation of 2 new positions. **Stephanie Simek has been hired as the Assistant Section Leader and Brian Scheick has been hired as a wildlife biologist.** Their expertise will be utilized in developing and implementing a comprehensive conservation strategy for black bears in Florida. A portion of the funding needed in this effort will come from a \$100,000 grant acquired from sales of the Conserve Wildlife license tag. Annual revenues from this fund have reached \$350,000 and are distributed by the Wildlife Foundation of Florida.

### MORTALITY

Road-induced mortality continues to be the leading known cause of death for bears in Florida. **Roadkill reached a new record in 2000 when 111 bears were killed in collisions with vehicles** (fig. 2). Other mortality during 2000 included: 3 illegal kills, 2 cubs killed in a forest fire, a drowning, and a bear that died of unknown causes. Hunting seasons for bears in Florida remain closed.

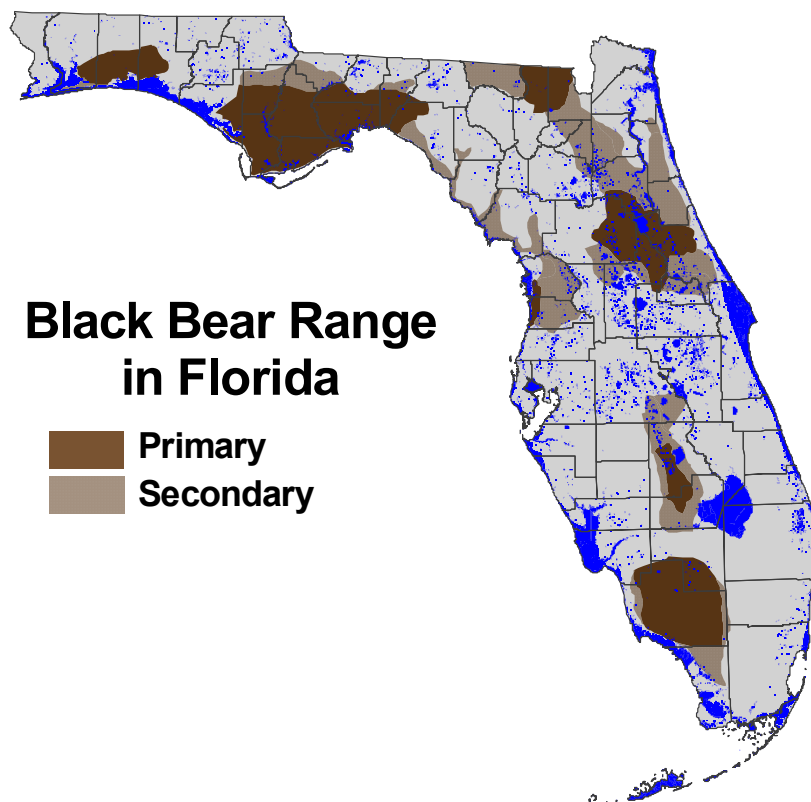
### MANAGEMENT

**FWC staff received 1,136 calls regarding bears in calendar year 2000, more than doubling the previous record** (fig. 3). Most of these calls involved people reporting bears in their yard or garbage, but many involved more serious situations such as bears damaging property, killing pets and livestock, or threatening people. To alleviate strain on staff from handling all of these calls, the FWC is experimenting with a pilot program that will utilize private contract agents to respond to bear complaints. Implementation of this program will begin in 2001. To raise awareness and understanding about bears in Florida, FWC staff has developed a 10-unit bear curriculum for use in schools and has sponsored several bear festivals in local communities. Attendance at the largest of these festivals approached 10,000 people and is growing each year. Other management efforts include formation of a statewide bear conservation working group and development of a statewide population monitoring effort. The monitoring effort will be funded by a 3-year grant from the Florida Department of Transportation and will use genetic analysis of hair samples collected in mark-recapture format to estimate abundance of core bear populations throughout Florida.

## RESEARCH

Two bear studies currently are being conducted in Florida. In the Chassahowitzka Bear Study, researchers from the University of Kentucky are investigating the status, demographics, and genetic viability of a remnant bear population located just north of Tampa. Bears in this population number less than 20 and are isolated in a small habitat block that is surrounded by development. In the Ocala Bear Study, personnel from the FWC are investigating the effects of roads on bear movements and habitat use in central Florida. This study is a collaborative effort among the FWC, Florida Department of Transportation, and U. S. Forest Service. The goal of the study is to provide information useful for advancing roadway design, placement, improvement, and maintenance with regard to black bear conservation and management in Florida.

Figure 1. Distribution of black bears in Florida as estimated by wildlife biologists and law enforcement officers from 1998 to 2000.



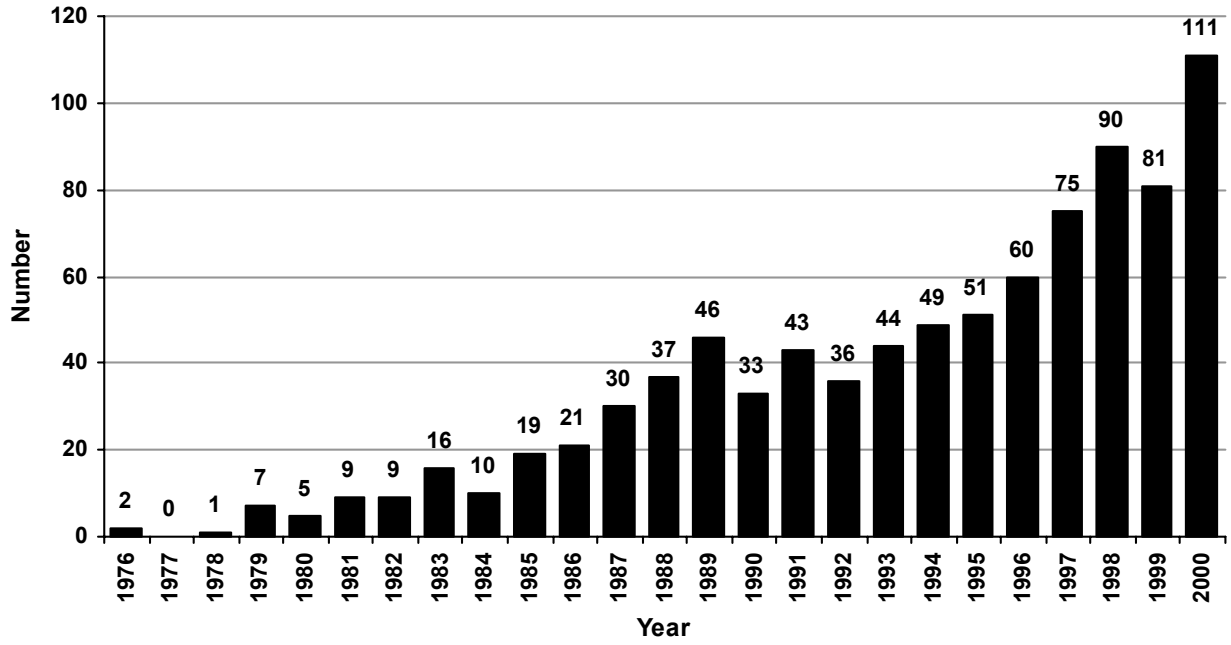


Figure 2. Number of roadkill bears in Florida.

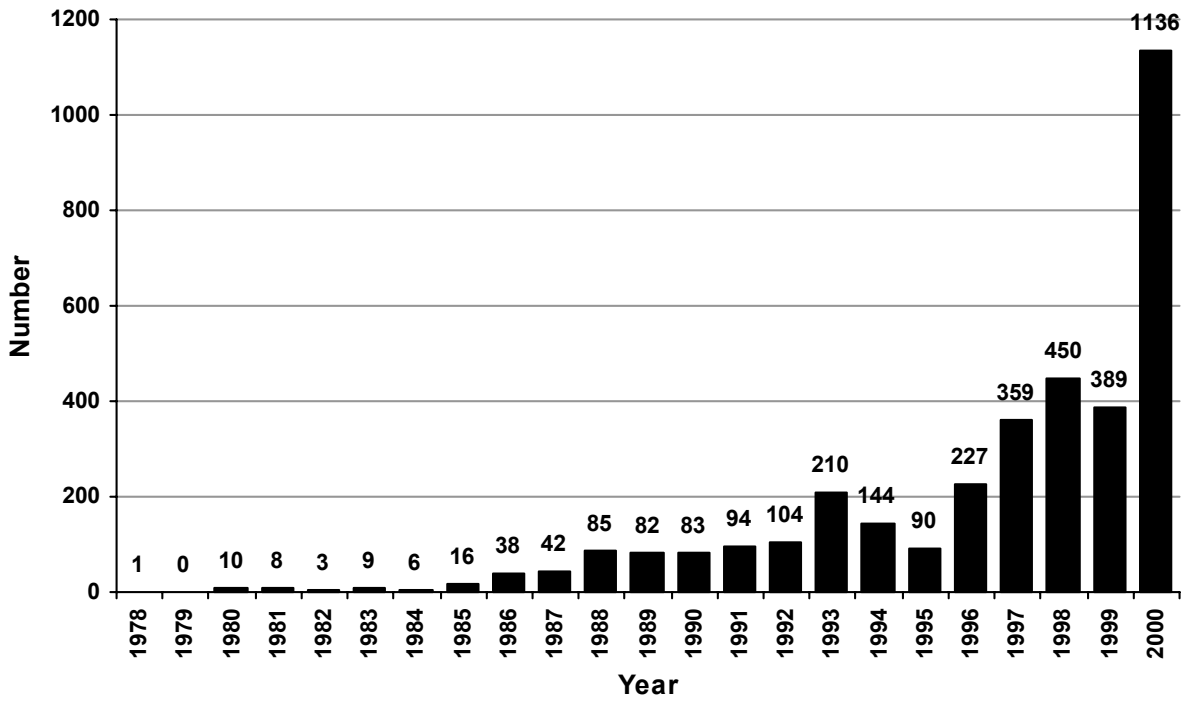


Figure 3. Number of bear nuisance complaints in Florida.