

Arkansas reclaims its status as the Bear State

April 25 2009, By JON GAMBRELL , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- The bear cub could be heard but remained unseen among the barren trees and dried leaves blanketing the forest floor.

The wheezing sounds of her suckling grew louder as a pair of state wildlife officials drew closer to a rock outcropping sheltering the black bear cub and her mother in the gray light of the March morning.

Myron Means, a bear biologist with the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission, loaded a tranquilizer dart into an air rifle and took aim at the mother, who only stared back as he pulled the trigger.

Slowly, the drugs took effect and the mother drifted into unconsciousness, allowing the wildlife officials to place a radio collar around her neck and pull away the still-suckling cub.

Such examinations are performed all winter at dens throughout Arkansas' Ouachita and Ozark mountains - where less than a century ago [black bears](#) were nearly killed off. In the 1950s, state officials launched a program to capture bears in Minnesota and Manitoba and drive them back to Arkansas.

More than 4,000 black bears now roam the region, and hunting, which nearly brought the bears' demise, again takes place in what once was known as the Bear State.

"We have brought back the bear," Means said.

When Arkansas was a territory, newspaper accounts promoted the idea of coming to the region for hunting. The prairies of east Arkansas filled each winter with ducks, while deer remained plentiful in the woods. And black bears - *Ursus americanus* - captured the imagination of many outdoorsmen in tales that described Arkansas as a rugged wilderness.

"There was this mystique about the big, black bears that lived in Arkansas," said Kimberly Smith, a professor at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville and a former Game and Fish Commission member.

By the Civil War, Arkansas was known as the Bear State, though legislators never accepted it as an official slogan. Rail lines that arrived in the mid-1800s and brought hunters unconcerned about the number of bears they killed.

The hunting, coupled with timber clearing, depleted the state's bear population. By 1928, the state's newly formed Game and Fish Commission reported that only 25 bears remained in the state. The commission banned bear hunts, though it also acknowledged there were questions about whether the bear had a place in a modern Arkansas.

"As a general rule the average person believes in killing a bear on sight, and, if one is not easily sighted, there is strong inclination to get the dogs and chase him down," a 1928 report by the commission reads. "When brought in court for ending the life of a bear the killer usually proves that the animal was destroying crops, poultry or livestock for him and thus creates a knotty problem for the judge or jury."

Still, the commission hoped the black bear would "grow in popularity and his protection (would) become assured from the public sentiment

standpoint." But even with bear hunting outlawed, the black bear population only numbered 50 heading into the 1950s.

In 1958, Game and Fish officials agreed to swap Arkansas bass and wild turkeys for bears from Minnesota and Manitoba. Traps were created by welding two 55-gallon drums together and baiting them with fish, fruit and even bacon grease.

Once bears were trapped, commission employees drove them back to Arkansas, releasing them into the wild. Much of their plan came from guesswork. For instance, commission workers released mostly male bears into the mountains for the first five years of the program.

"They weren't keeping track of what they were doing," Smith said. But "by the time they brought the females five years later, these bears were in the prime of their reproductive potential and they had all established territories. It sounds funny, but it actually worked out really well."

Also helping the reintroduction: no one outside the agency knew about it. The Game and Fish Commission, under a constitutional amendment voters passed in 1944, operates as an independent organization from state government. While local newspapers in Minnesota wrote about the bear captures, Smith said residents in Arkansas heard nothing about it.

"It was done totally in secret," he said.

Under that cover, the state's bear population grew rapidly. In 1973, state biologists estimated that as many as 700 bears roamed the state's mountains. By that point though, the commission ended its restocking efforts as angry homeowners wrote letters to newspapers, questioning where the bears in the yards of the rural homes came from, Smith said.

Even then, the number of bears continued to grow, helped by the vast

mountain habitat in sparsely populated western Arkansas.

"I think it was maybe a little bit of luck, but it was mostly habitat and numbers," said Joe Clark, a research ecologist with the U.S. Geological Survey at the University of Tennessee. "The habitat was good and the size of the area was really big, and so bears could afford to roam after they were reintroduced, whereas in other places, they might roam and get hit by cars or get into trouble with farmers."

In the Ozark National Forest north of Dover, Means and a helper dragged the slumbering 190-pound mother bear out her den. Means placed bandages over the bear's eyes to keep out dirt.

He wiped green ink inside the bear's mouth, punching a serial-number tattoo into her lip. The number, F212, matched those on tags pushed into her ears. He used a screwdriver-like tool to dig out a small tooth, which allowed the biologists to estimate the bear's age.

Nearby, another member of the group comforted the cub, whose long claws dug into her pink hooded sweat shirt.

A squirrel hunter had stumbled across the bears' den a few weeks earlier, a rare occurrence, Means said. Typically, black bears shy away from human contact and only become aggressive when they associate a person with food.

The Game and Fish Commission has allowed bear hunts in the state since 1980. Those hunts help winnow the population and keep the animals from expanding their territory into neighborhoods, Clark said.

The fall hunts also do something else.

"If people won't tolerate them, they won't be there for long. That's why they were gone to start with," Clark said. "If we can manage them so that they have value to the human occupants that they have to share the habitat with, it's a plus, I think, to the bears. I think the hunting is a good tool to enable us to give them that kind of value."

After 50 years, Arkansas' experiment has spread beyond its borders. Missouri wildlife officials say hikers and campers are seeing more black bears. In Oklahoma, state lawmakers passed a bill this year to allow hunters to kill black [bears](#) roaming in the eastern part of the state, where some say the animal has become a nuisance.

Means and his helper slid the mother back into her den. Means placed the cub against its mother, and in a few moments the cub found her teat and began suckling again.

The biologists left the bear there, hidden in her cave to wait for warmer days.

"She's just going to sit in there and mind her own business and expect you to walk right by her," Means said. "You could literally walk right over the front of a bear den and never realize you were there."

On the Net:

[Arkansas](#) Game and Fish Commission: <http://www.agfc.com/>

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