

Wisconsin's Northwoods: A Perfect Home For Black Bear Habitat, Hunting, Ancient Traditions

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"The black bear is viewed as both a symbol of Wisconsin's wildness and as choice prey. Seeing a black bear in the wild is an exciting experience for many and an equal thrill for those who prize the black bear as a big game species." – [from the Wisconsin's DNR website](#).

The Woodland Indians, especially the Ojibwe (Chippewa) people indigenous to Wisconsin's north woods, also highly regard the black bear, not only as game, but as a key figure in its culture. The black bear is called "Makwa" in the Ojibwe language and is one of the seven clans. The bear remains an important part of tradition for ceremonial and religious purposes with strong ties to the Anishinaabe (original man) mythology.

The American black bear (*Ursus americanus*) is a medium-sized bear weighing in at an average adult size of 240 pounds. The American black bear is the smallest of the three bears species found in North America, and are found only in North America. Black bears have short, non-retractable claws that they use to climb trees and mark their territory. Their fur is usually a uniform color except for a brown muzzle and light markings that sometimes appear on their chests. Black bears are omnivorous and extremely adaptable and live in many habitat types, though they are primarily found in forested areas with thick ground vegetation and an abundance of fruits, nuts and vegetation.

Black bears tend to be solitary animals, with the exception of mothers and cubs and where forage is plentiful. Cubs remain with the mother for a year and a half or more, even though they are weaned at 6-8 months of age. Females only reproduce every second year (or more). Should the young die for some reason, the female may reproduce again after only one year.

The mother bear is known to protect her cubs with ferocity. She is also cunning and knowledgeable about the plants of the forest. Like the mother bear, the Ojibwe Bear Clan is responsible for protecting its people. Members of the Bear Clan are short-tempered, and live on the outside of the village to ensure the safety of the gentler clans residing inside the village. The Bear Clan are also the medicine people for they know the healing ways of the plants available to them.

According to the 1885 publication [The History of the Ojibways](#) by William Warren, by Ojibwe tradition there were originally six human beings that came out of the sea to live among Ojibwe. The six beings were Wawaazisii (Bullhead), Ajejauk (Crane), Makwa (Bear), Moosance (Little Moose), Waabizheshi (Marten), and Bineshii (Thunderbird), and created the original grand families, called



Photo by the Wisconsin DNR

dodem or clans. In addition, clan symbols appear in ancient birch bark scrolls and treaty documents of centuries ago.

The clan system operated as a form of government, a method of organizing work, and a way of defining the responsibilities of each community member. Working together, the clans attended to the physical, intellectual, psychological, and spiritual needs of the community. Each was known by its totem (animal emblem). While each clan differs, all are considered equal.

The largest grand family group was the Bear (Makwa). Bear Clan members were war chiefs and warriors and were known for their thick black hair that never whitened even in old age. Long ago, warriors fought to defend their village or hunting territory with the tenacity of the black bear. They became known as master strategists in planning the defense of their people, and as healers.

Today, the bear population in Wisconsin is monitored by the Great Lakes Indian Fish & Wildlife Commission (GLIFWC) representing the 11 Ojibwe tribes in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan, and the State of Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR). The Wisconsin black bear population is thriving, estimated at 28,000 bears, and is expanding its occupied range in the state, based upon studies by the Wisconsin DNR. The black bear's primary range is in the far northern third of the state. Due to a growing population, bears are becoming much more common in the lower two-thirds of the state than ever before.

Wildlife biologists in Wisconsin conduct "marked/recapture" studies that provide information about bear numbers in the state, which helps develop guidelines to ensure a prosperous future for the species. This research is highly dependent on the help of volunteers, who place thousands of baits laced with a dye throughout the north each year. When a bear is harvested during the hunting season, a small piece of rib bone is extracted and examined for the dye to help estimate the wild bear population.

With a growing bear population in the Northwoods, it is common for black bears, which are always looking for food, to enter your backyard, your porch or maybe enter your garage or onto your deck or even climb up one of your apple trees. If you are experiencing any problems with bears, and are located in northern Wisconsin, please contact USDA Wildlife Services at 800-228-1368 (in-state) or 715-369-5221. In southern Wisconsin call 800-433-0663 (in-state) or 920-324-4514.

Wisconsin's bear population is managed primarily through hunting under a strict quota/permit issuance system. According to WDNR, more than 109,000 hunters applied for 11,520 permits in 2016, making the wait to receive a harvest permit approximately 1 to 9 years, depending on the bear management zone. However, when one finally receives a permit, the opportunity to harvest a bear is better than 40 percent for most zones and some of the biggest bears in the country are taken in Wisconsin. Several bears registered by hunters each year top 600 or 700 pounds!

If you would like to hunt black bear in Wisconsin, you must possess a Class A bear license. You may obtain a Class A bear license by: 1) being selected in the bear drawing, 2) participating in the Learn to Bear Hunt Program, or 3) receiving a Class A bear license transfer via the Awarded Permit Transfers Program or the Deceased Customer Preference Approval Transfer. Bear hunters must apply for a bear license or earn preference points at least once every three years to avoid losing any accumulated preference points.

To find out about how many points you have accumulated: contact the DNR Call Center 1-888-936-7463; visit the online licensing center or contact your local DNR Service Center.

Other contact information on bear management, please contact Maggie Stewart, Assistant Big Game Ecologist, at 608-261-7588.

Links:

- Bear hunting and population studies: <https://dnr.wi.gov/topic/hunt/bear.html>
- Bear hunting licenses: <https://dnr.wi.gov/topic/hunt/bearlic.html>
- Living with black bears in Wisconsin:
 - <https://dnr.wi.gov/topic/wildlifehabitat/documents/bearpractice.pdf>
 - Reporting damage and nuisance wildlife:
<https://dnr.wi.gov/topic/wildlifehabitat/damage.html>