The future looks brighter for the threatened Louisiana black bear.
OUR BEARS ARE BACK!

By Curtis Darrah

The last word in ignorance is the man who says of an animal or plant, “What good is it?” If the land mechanism as a whole is good, then every part is good, whether we understand it or not,” wrote Aldo Leopold, one of the founders of the science of modern wildlife management.

Leopold’s words, written in the mid-20th century, eloquently state the case for preserving the future of the Louisiana black bear, placed on the federal endangered species list in 1992 as threatened. A recently completed study indicates that our official state mammal is now on the increase. Moving back from the brink, perhaps the Louisiana black bear will soon join the brown pelican and American bald eagle as modern conservation successes.

Habitat improvements, some from easement programs where landowners turn marginal agricultural land back into forested wetland, have played an important role. Key factors in the turnaround were wildlife management partnerships of state, federal and private organizations, a critical period of protection and cooperation from the public.

For the past three summers, University of Tennessee graduate student Jesse Troxler studied bears in 118 sites from Avery Island to Morgan City. The research on the reclusive bears in the coastal area of Iberia and St. Mary parishes estimated bear numbers through DNA analysis, using hair snagged when the bears climbed over or under barbed wire to get at food.

Combined with earlier studies in the Tensas River Basin and Pointe Coupee Parish, state and federal officials now have solid scientific data to determine whether these Louisiana natives can no longer be considered threatened.

Troxler told attendees at a public meeting in Franklin in August that originally these bears roamed the whole state and into Mississippi, Texas and Arkansas. But now the population is confined to the coastal parishes, plus a remnant population in Tensas and Pointe Coupee.

Since the end of the Civil War, Louisiana’s swamps and wetlands have been steadily converted into easily-cultivated land. This has put decades of pressure on the widespread Louisiana black bear, until its numbers reached a critical low by the 1980s.

“Bears are big animals: they require big, contiguous...
blocks of forest. Bottomland hardwood forests are best because they have large trees for denning,” and abundant food including nuts, acorns and pecans and berries, Troxler said. “Back in the mid-eighties, the population in the coast was estimated as low as 30 individuals. What habitat left was pretty much broken up into fragments.”

That is tough on a creature that roams a lot of territory to make a living. Maria Davidson, large carnivore program manager for the Louisiana Department of Wildlife & Fisheries, noted that to find food and mates male bears will cover an average of 20,000 acres or more, females around 5,000.

In her 18-year career with the department, Davidson has enjoyed a front row seat to the bears’ recovery. Her favorite part of the job is crawling into bear dens. She has a photo of herself (right) in the hollow trunk of an overturned tree, arms wrapped around the neck of a tranquilized momma bear, attaching a radio tracking collar. On another den visit six years earlier, she held that same bear in her arms when it was just a cub.

“Large carnivores have always been just a passion for me, so managing the bear population for the state of Louisiana is an honor and a responsibility that I take extremely seriously. Just ask anybody who knows me—they’ll say maybe a little too seriously,” she laughs, sitting in her cramped office in Opelousas with Sophie, a retired LDWF bear dog, stretched out near her feet.

How many bears do we have in the state? Getting a definitive number for these reclusive animals is difficult, but based on the studies, estimates range from 500 to 750.

Adult males weigh from 250 to over 400 pounds, with body length up to 6 feet; females run smaller. Not true hibernators, Louisiana black bears make day beds, but remain active all winter. If the bears have not put on enough weight for the lean winter months, they will forage for food, eat, then sleep another few weeks. Pregnant females must den, either in trees or right on the ground, and their cubs are born around February.

Glimpsing one of these shy and intelligent creatures in the wild is rare. But they cross paths with home- or camp-owners in the areas they roam, and problems sometimes result. Handling nuisance bears is an important part of Davidson’s job. She knows that our state will only support a healthy population of bears if the animals retain the support of the public. People must believe, like Aldo Leopold, that such a species is an essential part of Louisiana’s landscape.

If you see a bear, call 1-800-442-2511 to report it, she advised. And don’t be alarmed: just give it some space. “Given the opportunity, they’re going to move away from danger rather than approach it. When we see bears that won’t leave a yard when people move into the yard and yell at it to go away, that’s a bear that’s been eating in yards for a long time. And he’s not necessarily aggressive to people, he’s just become immune to their presence.”

On rare occasions such bears, nearly always male, may become overly protective of the meal they’ve found. Bears that cross that line become a public safety risk and are euthanized. “Those bears have been raised on garbage and they get to the point where we can no longer rehabilitate them. Ironically, we are killing a bear for the very safety of the people who have created his behavior,” she continued.

“When you’re thinking about bear-proofing your home or camp, remember that bears will eat anything edible: you just want to make sure that there’s nothing a bear can make a meal out of,” Davidson said. In areas with bears, people do themselves and the bears a favor when they remove attractants such as easily accessible garbage, bird feeders or other potential food. “Don’t be part of the problem,” she said. “Bears are driven by food. And bears are really smart. If all your neighbors are allowing this type of thing at their house, the bear’s going to come to see what you have to offer, too. It doesn’t take a bear but one time to know that those huge 95-gallon trash cans have great things inside, so it goes to every single one.”

Compared to the eighties and nineties, the future for our state mammal is looking much brighter. “We’re on the brink of a new day for the Louisiana black bear,” Davidson said. “We believe that the bear is recovered, we believe that the data will show that we have a viable population. When that happens, we will begin discussions with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service on how to proceed with the proposed rule in the Federal Register for delisting.”

A population viability assessment will conclude within the next few months and monitoring will continue. State and federal wildlife managers will have the data they need to begin deciding whether Louisiana’s black bears have recovered to the point where they can be removed from the endangered list.

If so, their future more secure, the bears can be managed by the state as part of our wild landscape for generations to come.