



State animal: Black bear once teetered on brink of extinction

- Rick Steelhammer
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CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- In 1955, when the Department of Natural Resources completed a poll of West Virginia students, teachers and sportsmen regarding their choice for an official state animal, the black bear emerged as the paws-down winner. At that time, only about 500 of the native-born bruins could be found in West Virginia. The black bear was hanging on to its ecological niche in the Mountain State by its claws. It was that kind of persevering spirit that made the animal so attractive to those who wanted to see it named the official state animal. "The black bear typifies the spirit of all West Virginians in their ability to survive in spite of the adversity of people and industry encroaching upon their natural habitat," according to the text of the proclamation naming the shaggy omnivore the state animal. Today, thanks to sound management procedures put in place by the DNR, reforestation and changes in public attitude about the animals, between 8,000 and 10,000 black bears now live in West Virginia. Populations of the state animal can now be found in every county. The black bear has regained the ground it lost when logging and farming decimated the state's forests in the late 1800s and early 1900s, jeopardizing the future of a once-thriving population of the native bruins. During the early part of the past century, at the same time its habitat was being sawed down and hauled away, the black bear was considered a dangerous varmint and was often shot on sight. Hunting restrictions were put in place, and two large blocks of land in the Monongahela National Forest were designated black bear sanctuaries. As bear populations in the sanctuaries grew, black bears spilled into the surrounding woodlands and multiplied. A law that delayed the start of the winter firearms season until after most females had denned up for hibernation is credited with substantially increasing the state's bear population. Bear numbers recovered enough to eventually open the sanctuaries, located in the Spruce Knob and Cranberry Backcountry areas, to hunting. Last year, hunters killed 2,683 black bears in West Virginia, a state record bear harvest. The top bear-producing county was Webster. While several bears killed by West

Virginia hunters have topped the 600-pound mark, black bears are known to reach weights in excess of 800 pounds, like the 879-pounder bagged by a Pennsylvania hunter in 2010. One of the longest-living wild black bears known to science was a West Virginian nicknamed Quagmire by the DNR biologists who trapped her and rigged her with a radio collar in the early 1980s. When her collar dropped off in 2010, just before hibernation time, Quagmire was 29 years old -- nearly three times the average lifespan of black bears in the wild. Biologists suspect the sow, who added 20 cubs to the state's black bear population during the course of her life, failed to survive the winter of 2010-11. Black bears are generally less than 6 feet long, and stand 2 to 3 feet high at the shoulder. Adult males generally range in weight from 150 to 450 pounds, with females averaging 100 to 300 pounds. While western black bears often go through blond and cinnamon color phases, West Virginia's black bears are uniformly black with brownish muzzles. Five to 10 percent of the West Virginia bears have white markings on their chests, ranging from a few flecks to distinct "V" patterns. *Reach Rick Steelhammer at rsteelhammer@wvgazette.com or 304-348-5169.*