

Black Bear Hunting on the Honobia Creek and Three Rivers WMAs

The words “black bear” and “hunting season” in the same sentence are all that is needed to get the attention of big game hunters. Fortunately, there are three large public hunting areas in southeast Oklahoma that offer black bear hunting opportunities for anyone interested. While the Ouachita National Forest probably has the highest concentration of bears, the Honobia Creek and Three Rivers WMAs should not be overlooked.

Let’s make no mistake about it, harvesting a black bear on public hunting land is no easy task. But isn’t that what hunting is all about- a challenge? Nearly all black bear hunting in the United States is done with the use of bait including molasses, honey, grease, sardines, corn, and so on. The challenge about bear hunting on public land in Oklahoma including the Honobia Creek and Three Rivers WMAs is that the baiting of black bear is prohibited. But just because bait cannot be used on the WMAs doesn’t necessarily mean that harvesting a bear is impossible. What it does mean is that scouting, strategy, patience, and a good understanding about black bear biology are even more important.

Hunting black bear, perhaps more than any other game species in Oklahoma, requires a thorough knowledge of the animal. In Oklahoma, the black bear hunting season begins for archery hunters on October 1. For deer, the month of October usually means that bucks are already beginning to show signs of the rut and, in general, where does can be found bucks are not far behind. For black bear, however, mating season occurs from late spring into early summer. Come October 1, bears begin to have hibernation on their mind and searching for suitable den sites consumes much of their time. But they also spend considerable time fattening up for hibernation, often 18 to 20 hours per day, and this is the key to finding a bear during the hunting season.

By far, the most important food item for bears during the fall is acorns. Even when black bear are being baited with goodies such as bacon grease and powdered sugar, the bears quickly turn their attention to falling acorns which are high in energy and digestibility. For this reason, hardwood dominated areas should be scouted during the summer months to determine the presence or absence of a good acorn crop. Because black bear prefer relatively undisturbed large forest areas, the best hardwood dominated areas to scout would be those that are some distance from any road traffic. Steep and rough areas, year-round walk-in only areas, and habitats with limited or no vehicle access are great areas to scout first. Hardwood habitats mixed with a variety of young pine plantations and cleared timber areas are regularly found within a bear’s home range and should be given extra attention when located by any hunter scouting for the presence of black bear. Young clear-cut areas often provide an abundance of soft mast producing plants including blackberries and pokeberries which are favorite food sources during the summer months.

When black bear are eating as much as 20 hours in a single day, they will also have a need to visit a watering hole more often. In areas lacking a permanent source of water, especially during drought years, scouting hard to find watering holes and small ponds can prove to be productive. Watering holes may be anything from creeks, small ponds, or even standing water in low-lying holes, but don’t overlook small springs as bears seem to

favor springs when available. Finding bear tracks at a watering hole is a good sign and a little extra scouting effort in and around the watering hole for food sources and trails will help indicate whether the area is an area regularly visited by black bear or used on occasion.

In addition to learning the feeding habits of black bear, having knowledge about other biological aspects of black bears will improve a hunter's chances. Learning what black bear tracks look like as well as how an older bear's track compares in size to a younger bear's track will help in determining if a boar may be in the area. Studying photographs of younger versus older bears will help in being able to distinguish a cub or younger bear from an old boar. In general, boars will have a wider cranium than females and the ears on a younger bear will look larger than on an older male as bears usually grow into their ears at three years of age essentially allowing a bear's body size to catch up to the quick ear growth during the first few years of a young bear's life.

Like deer hunting, sometimes the little things that get overlooked can be the difference between having a chance to harvest a bear or not seeing one at all. Bears, in general, have relatively average eyesight, but more than make up for it with a keen sense of smell and hearing. A black bear's sense of smell is 250 times better than that of a human, which means even the smallest unnatural odor can ruin a hunt. Wearing cover scent, not smoking while in the tree stand or blind, and not wearing hunting clothes as everyday clothes are good ways to avoid those unnatural odors and alerting a bear to your presence. While baiting black bear on public lands is prohibited, chewing on a piece of mint gum while sitting in the tree stand can not only cover up any unnatural odors, but also spread the scent of mint into the air which is highly attractive to black bears.

Perhaps the greatest perk about hunting black bear in Oklahoma is that the black bear season runs concurrent with a large portion of the deer archery season. Another perk is that probably the best location to encounter a bear during October is where acorns are available which is exactly where deer are likely to be encountered as well. A deer archery hunter can purchase a bear tag and have the added bonus of having a great chance of harvesting a nice deer, and, with a little luck, an optimistic chance of harvesting a black bear. A strategy that has proven successful for many bear hunters is using a predator call. A distress call from a deer fawn or rabbit is likely to get the attention of any bears in the area, especially males which are generally more aggressive to responding to distress calls in search of a free meal.

Oklahoma's inaugural black bear hunting season in 2009 was a great success with 19 black bear harvested. With some time and effort learning about black bear, scouting areas for food and water sources, looking at aerial photographs to find those hard to reach areas, and hunting with persistence and patience, even a first time bear hunter can improve the odds a little in his or her favor and quite possibly harvest a bear for the dinner table. Is it easy to harvest a black bear on public land? No, but the joy of hunting doesn't just come from harvesting an animal, it comes from the whole experience. When the harvest is made, it just makes all of that hard work and determination even sweeter.

The Honobia Creek and Three Rivers WMAs are privately owned by timber companies, but open to the public through cooperative agreements between the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation and each timber company. Accessing the Honobia Creek and Three Rivers WMAs for any type of recreation does require each person to purchase a Land Access Fee permit. The permit, \$40 for Oklahoma residents between the ages of 18 and 64 and \$85 for nonresidents (no age exemptions for nonresidents), is good for one calendar year and is sold at all locations in Oklahoma that sell hunting and fishing licenses. All revenue from each Land Access Fee permit sold goes not only toward the management of the WMAs, but also to pay the timber investment companies an annual lease fee to help keep the WMAs open for the public to enjoy.

Feel free to contact the Honobia Creek and Three Rivers Wildlife Management Area biologist at 918-527-5308 before planning your next hunting trip to the Honobia Creek and Three Rivers WMAs.



Although black bear are more abundant on the Ouachita National Forest, black bear are encountered on the Honobia Creek and Three Rivers WMAs like this one north of the Boktuklo Creek Walk-in Turkey Hunting Area.



One of the 19 black bear harvested during Oklahoma's 2009 black bear season was taken from the Three Rivers WMA.

Black bear are especially attracted to hardwood and pine-hardwood habitats during October as they feed on acorns and prepare for their winter hibernation.

