

Chapter 13

BLACK BEAR HUNTING IN NJ



Objectives

- Determine legal methods for bear hunting
- Determine proper shot placement
- Learn how to move bear from the field
- Learn about special concerns when cooking bear

The black bear (*Ursus americana*) is NJ's largest land mammal. A species that was once on the brink due mostly to habitat destruction is now thriving greater than ever in the garden state. Regulated hunting was shut down in 1970. In the several decades that followed, the population rebounded. Now, NJ has the highest black bear density in the world. Just like any other species, black bears need to be managed to keep them in balance with their habitat and the residents that live in bear country. NJ had its first bear season in recent years in 2003. Another season was held in 2005 and then from 2010 through present.

Black bears have been reported in all 21 counties of NJ, however the highest density is found in northwest NJ in the counties of Sussex, Passaic, Morris and Warren. Due to excellent genetics, mild winters and abundant food sources, NJ has an extremely healthy population with some of the largest bears found anywhere. Some of the largest bears have tipped the scales in excess of 700 lbs.

However, the averages are much smaller with adult males averaging around 400 pounds and adult females averaging around 200 pounds.



How Can I Hunt Bear?

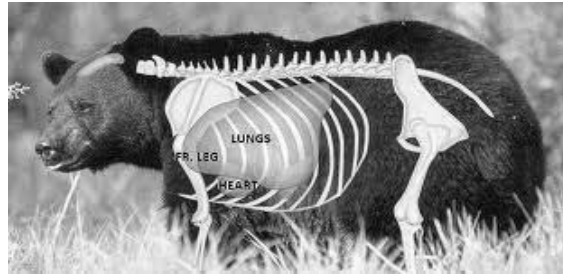
Before attempting to hunt for bear, one needs to obtain a bear permit for the zone you plan to hunt. Remember, bear zone boundaries are different than deer zone and turkey area boundaries. Current information can be found in the NJ Fish and Wildlife Hunting Digest.

Bears can be legally harvested by stand hunting, still hunting or drives. NJ State law states that one cannot hunt within 100 yards of bait while elevated in a tree or in a constructed ground blind. Bait can be used if one is on the ground not in a constructed blind or if one is further then 100 yards from the bait. No bait is allowed for any species on wildlife refuges and the Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area.

Shotguns, 20 – 10 gauge, loaded with slugs and muzzleloaders .44 cal and larger are permitted. Penetration is very important when bear hunting. Their heavy coat and thick layer of fat acts as a ballistic gel, that can cause solid lead projectiles to mushroom on impact giving little penetration. Whether hunting with the shotgun or muzzleloader, it is recommended to use copper plated sabots for better penetration. The closer the shot, the better the penetration.

Shot Placement

Shot placement is extremely important. Your goal is to take only high percentage shots. The best shots are going to be with the bear either broadside or slightly quartering away. The bone structure on a bear is much heavier then that of a deer. A bear's shoulder bone can easily stop a shotgun slug. For this reason, it is very important to aim slightly behind the shoulder, even on a broadside shot.



After the Shot

Just like deer hunting, it is important to mark the spot where the bear was standing when you shot, the last place where you saw it and last place where you heard it. Remember to wait at least 20 minutes before getting down to start tracking. Because the bear have such a heavy layer of fat, this can plug the entrance and exit holes. Therefore, even a mortally shot bear may have very little if any blood on the ground. It is extremely important to follow up on every shot and not give up.

Most NJ hunters are accustomed to harvesting whitetails. Even the largest buck can be moved by a single person without too much difficulty by grabbing the deer by its antlers. Moving a black bear is a different story. Even a relatively small bear, becomes difficult to maneuver with no easy way to grab hold of. The easiest way to move a bear is to have team of reliable friends to help carry it. Commercially made carts, can work, but be aware of their weight limits. An ATV can make work much easier, but remember to secure permission from the land owner first. For extremely large bear, it may be easier to quarter the animal in the field and pack it out in pieces. Remember all the quarters along with the head and hide need to be taken to the check station. A list of check stations can be found in the NJ Fish and Wildlife Hunting Digest.

The thick hide and heavy layer of fat on a bear acts as an excellent insulator. The skin needs to be removed for adequate cooling as soon as possible. Even in sub-freezing temperatures, the meat will not properly cool with the skin on. If you wish to mount the bear or have the skin tanned, talk to your taxidermist. Many times the taxidermist will skin the bear for you. If you don't plan on butchering the bear yourself, make sure you have a butcher lined up ahead of time. Many butchers are too busy butchering deer this time of year to deal with bear.

Our fall harvested bear are at their prime with the highest fat content of the year. This makes for a very flavorful meat that will soon be one of your favorites. Remember that since bear can carry *Trichinella*, it is important to cook the meat thoroughly, much as you would do with pork. Bears can also carry *Toxoplasmosis*, a parasitic disease that is often associated with cats. Women who may be pregnant should not handle raw bear meat. Cooking bear meat to an internal temperature of 170 degree for 15 seconds should insure the meat is safe to eat for both *Trichinella* and *Toxoplasmosis*.

Remember, as a bear hunter you are helping manage one of our very important native species of the Garden State. You have legal rights as a hunter engaging in the legal pursuit of a game animal. There is a hunter harassment law that guarantees this. If someone is harassing you, don't confront them. Call Fish and Wildlife Law Enforcement to handle the situation. As with any game species, laws frequently change. For up to date season information check out the current issue of the NJ Fish and Wildlife Hunting Digest or go to www.njfishandwildlife.com/dighnt.htm.