



Gator Gazette

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This Month Focus — The Bear Essentials

There is only one bear species in the state of Florida — the (*Ursus Americanus Floridanus*)

Florida Black Bear is the only bear species in the state. They can be found in swamps, flatwoods, oak scrubs, hammocks, forests and, yes, occasionally in a Solivita neighborhood.

Black Bears thrived in Florida for centuries until hunted to near extinction. The Florida Black Bear was considered a threatened species from 1974 through 2012, but the Black Bear population has since recovered and officials estimate about 4,050 in the wild statewide.



The Florida Black Bear was classified as **recovered** in 2012. This means it was removed from the state's threatened species list after successful conservation efforts brought the population back from near extinction. However, despite being considered recovered, the species remains protected under state law and requires ongoing monitoring.

Bears play a crucial role in our ecosystem as both an apex predator and keystone species. They help regulate prey populations, disperse seeds through their droppings, and contribute to nutrient cycling, they also aerate soil by foraging, which benefits plant growth.

These marvelous carnivores are termed a "**Keystone Species**," which means that bears have a disproportionately large impact on the structure and functioning of their ecosystems. If bears were to disappear, the ecosystem would change significantly, potentially leading to the decline of other species or the rise of invasive species.

While we humans must always be mindful of the potential danger imposed by the presence of a bear, we should not overreact. Bears are generally very shy animals that flee at the very sight of a human. Like other large predators they must be respected, but admired and cared for as a reflection of the great contribution they make in keeping Florida beautiful

Are Bears Related To Your Beagle?

What is a bear? Well, like so many things in science — it's complicated.

Yes, bears and dogs are distantly related. They both belong to the order **Carnivora**, which includes various carnivorous mammals. While they share a common ancestor, it's not a recent one. Bears are more closely related to seals, sea lions, and walruses than they are to dogs. The common ancestor of dogs and bears lived 62-32 million years ago. While both animals are mammals, today they've branched apart from this common ancestor.

There are several ways to study different species' interrelatedness. The most popular is fossil evidence. We dig up bones or fossil impressions that clearly identify themselves as some quasi-species that two current species likely descended from. The most recent connection between two species is known as a common ancestor. The second and more important way that we can look at shared evolutionary history is through DNA. DNA evidence allows us to look back in time with relative certainty and see how closely things are related. When two species share highly similar DNA, it's likely they are closely related and have a not-too-distant common ancestor.

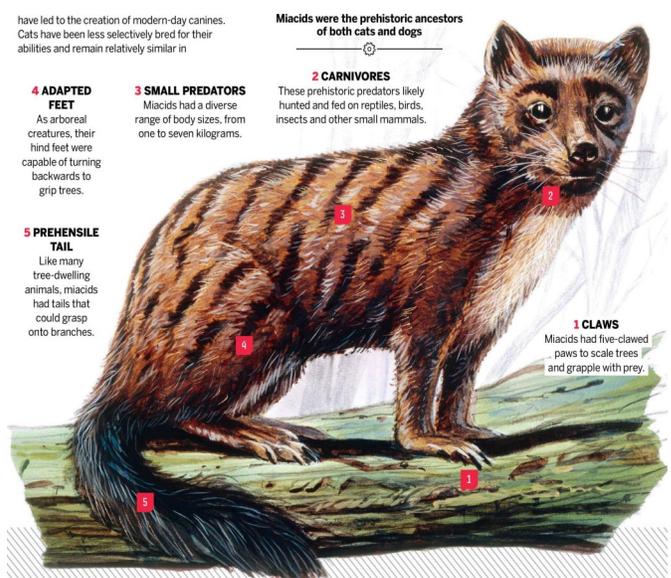
So, while they're not *directly* related, there are taxonomic classifications that can reveal just how close a relationship there is. Dogs and bears are both within the suborder Caniformia (literally meaning dog-like carnivorans). This taxonomical classification includes dogs, bears, wolves, foxes, raccoons, and mustelids. Many species within this order have **non-retractable claws** and are generally omnivorous.

This sub-order split from Feliformia (cat-like carnivorans), from which lions, cats, and other felines descended. Within the sub-order Caniformia, nine families currently exist. Dogs and wolves exist within the Canidae family, while bears are classified within the Ursidae family. In short, **dogs and bears are related by sub-order, but their families and species differ**. Overall, dogs, wolves, and bears are related by their sub-order and have a shared ancestor that isn't all that distant.

The most recent common ancestor between bears and dogs is **Miacids**. Miacids lived between 62-32 million years ago. They were rather successful, surviving for at least 28 million years. These extinct mammals are believed to have evolved into the modern basis for the order Carnivora, of which the sub-order Caniformia and Feliformia diverged. They likely looked like martens and weasels, with some living in the trees and others living on the ground.

Miacids are the basis for all modern carnivores and likely preyed on anything smaller than they were. As these Miacids spread, they began to specialize in their ecological niches. In Africa, where felines developed, the abundance of meat and herd animals likely allowed them to evolve into the super predators that we know as lions and leopards. In North America and Europe, the need for a more diverse diet led to more omnivorous animals, like what we see with bears, dogs, and otters.

So, yes, your beagle is, in fact, related to a bear. But don't confuse the two. A bear will not fetch, sit or sleep at your feet. But, it's interesting — don't you think?



WHAT LEVEL OF DANGER DOES A BLACK BEAR GENERALLY PRESENT?

Florida officials recently confirmed that a man and his dog were killed by a bear, a first for the state. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission reported their investigation into the **first fatal black bear attack in the state's history**. Evidence and DNA collected from a black bear confirmed it was the animal that killed 89-year-old Robert Markel and his dog. The man was found 100 yards from his home, along with his dog. Both show signs of a bear attack. Authorities also said signs suggested that the bear had entered the house. There was no evidence that the bear broke into the home, indicating that the door had likely been left open.

Officials report that it is rare for wild black bears in Florida to injure people, however, people have been bitten and scratched by bears, most often when there are cubs, food sources or dogs present. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission receives an average of 6,300 bear-related calls annually and has documented only **forty-two (42)** prior incidents where wild black bears have made physical contact with people since the **1970s**, when comprehensive records began being kept. Of those, only **three (3)** resulted in serious injuries requiring medical attention prior to this incident. Recent rapid population expansion may play a future role.



Choosing to live in a conservation oriented community like Solivita requires a commitment to certain wildlife safety procedures. Although bear sightings are rare, there have been several over the past year requiring us all to be more cautious. Here are the

BASIC RULES OF BEAR SAFETY

- ◆ NEVER FEED ANY WILDLIFE – BEARS WILL FIND IT
- ◆ KEEP YOUR TRASH CAN IN YOUR GARAGE WHEN NOT OUT FOR WEEKLY COLLECTION
- ◆ KEEP ALL DOORS CLOSED - ESPECIALLY THE GARAGE DOOR
- ◆ KEEP A SAFE DISTANCE IF YOU ENCOUNTER A BEAR — AT LEAST 30 FT
- ◆ IF YOU ENCOUNTER A BEAR BACKUP SLOWLY, RAISE YOUR ARMS ABOVE YOUR HEAD AND REPEAT IN A SLOW, FIRM MANNER — “GO AWAY BEAR.”





MINUTES FROM MAY CLUB MEETING

President, Bob Monica called meeting to order at 5:00 pm at Palms. BOD present: Leo Mills, Vivian Aber & Barbara McDonald. Rick McKelvey, Joanne Bodziony absent.

PRESIDENT'S REPORT

- Minutes of last meeting were approved. We now have 226 members.
- Future meeting date is - June 2, 2025. Future dates are available on the SWA website.
- The gator report for the end of April 2025 indicates no gators has been removed.
- Leo Mills, Treasurer gave a review of finances. Cash on hand currently is \$5,751.54.
- Bob surveyed the attendees as to what other items did they recommend being sold to the community to generate funds (Aluminum Can Koozies, Hats, Golf Cart License Plates, Beach Towels, Sweatshirts, Novelty Light and Stuffed Alligators).
- Program Director, Barbara McDonald, reported that the summer are slow times with absent snowbirds. The bear expert from FWC will be here in the fall.
- We are a service club dedicated to serving the needs of the community's wildlife and supporting local 501c wildlife organizations.
- Bob introduced information about the planning of a fundraising event in the winter of 2026. Volunteers to serve on the Steering/Planning Committee were solicited.
- Meeting ended at 6:00 pm.



Florida Wildlife Federation Calls for Science and Transparency on the Pending Florida Black Bear Hunt

Solvita Wildlife Advocates remains steadfast in our commitment to science-based wildlife management and transparent decision-making. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's (FWC) proposed hunting the Florida black bear during the May meeting with commissioners who approved the changes. Many wildlife advocates, including the Florida Wildlife Federation believe that the revisions are ill conceived with potentially disastrous results.

What Has Been Approved?

State Wildlife Commissioners approved a regulated black bear hunt across several Bear Management Units (BMUs) including the East Panhandle, North Florida, Central Florida, and South regions. The hunts would occur from December 6 to 28, 2025, with a quota of 187 bears total broken up by BMU. A draft rule has not been published. However, **dog hunting** and the use of **agricultural products for baiting**, have also been approved.



What are the Goals? Are they Supported by Science?

Florida Wildlife Commission has stated that a hunt is **not biologically necessary** but will “provide access to the resource and manage the population.” In other words... there is no scientific need to kill bears, we just want to limit the amount of bears in Florida. We continue to support the conservation success for Florida black bear populations and clear harvest objectives from FWC.

Five key questions:

1. What is the goal of a bear hunt?
2. What is the current estimated bear population and growth rate?
3. Will a harvest model be completed prior to the hunt?
4. What limitations exist that would prevent up-to-date models?
5. What safeguards will prevent overharvesting?

Why This Matters.

In 2015, a bear hunt in Florida was halted after just two days when quotas **were exceeded**. Florida Wildlife Federation provided feedback after the 2015 bear hunt, providing suggestions to avoid past mistakes, such as:

- Conducting a biologically-sustainable demographic analysis for each BMU
- Temporarily prohibiting deer feeders on hunting lands
- Supporting outreach and education dedicated to reducing bear-human interactions
- Creating bear sanctuaries, increasing habitat connectivity and conservation

Florida Wildlife Federation Calls for Science and Transparency on the Pending Florida Black Bear Hunt (CONTINUED)

Methods such as the use of dogs (starting in 2027), and baiting with agricultural products on private lands, **should not be allowed**. Bears are lured to a sight for an easy meal and summarily executed. This is deemed to be “hunting.” Similarly, specially trained hounds pursue a bear aggressively, attacking and mauling a bear if caught. The “hunt” usually results in the bear climbing a tree for safety or trapped in an inescapable location. Once again the “hunt” ends with when the bear is simply shot and killed. Bear meat is rarely eaten by hunters. It’s all done in the name of “sport.”

Killing animals for fun, or to mount its head on a wall, is not deemed a sport by our organization. Florida’s Black Bears are a vital part of our state’s natural heritage. They experience fear and pain like all living things. Decisions impacting their future must be guided by science — not recreation.

What Can We Do?

There is a good chance that we are already too late to help. But specific rulemaking could follow at their August 13-14 meeting tentatively planned in Tallahassee. Contact the commissioners at the [CLICK HERE](#) link below. Voice your opinion against the bear hunt in the strongest terms - reminding these officials that voters remember decisions like these in upcoming elections.

ELECTIONS HAVE CONSEQUENCES.

[Click Here](#)



JUNE'S FEATURED WILDLIFE RESCUE PROVIDER



University of Central Florida

Arboretum and Sustainability Initiatives - Wildlife Help

Who should I call if I come across injured wildlife?

It is important that you don't touch any wildlife! This is for both your safety and the sake of the animal. Some species such as gopher tortoises are protected by state law. It is important that you call a professional who is trained to safely handle wildlife.

If you come across injured or orphaned wildlife, please contact a [Licensed Wildlife Rehabilitator](#).

o Rehabilitators in Orange County:

✦ Wildlife Rehabilitation Center of Central Florida: **(407) 568-3200**

✦ Audubon Center for Birds of Prey: **(407) 644-0190**

✦ Back To Nature Wildlife, Inc: **(407) 568-5138**

✦ If you come across a sick or injured gopher tortoise, please call the FWC Gopher Tortoise Program at **(850) 921-1030** on weekdays, 8am – 5pm. After hours and on weekends, please call the FWC Wildlife Alert hotline at **(888) 404-3922**.

- You should call the FWC Wildlife Alert hotline **(888-404-3922)** if you see or suspect a wildlife violation anywhere in the state! For domestic or feral animals, please contact the nearest Humane Society, Animal Services Office, or Animal Control Agency.

