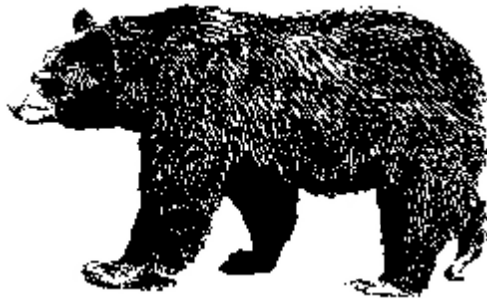


ARKANSAS GAME AND FISH COMMISSION
WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT DIVISION

2020 BLACK BEAR HARVEST REPORT



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Introduction

Arkansas' black bear population, historically distributed statewide, was nearly extirpated by the early 1900's because of over exploitation from unregulated hunting and habitat loss caused by human population expansion. In 1915, the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission (AGFC) was created and in 1927 bear hunting was closed because of declining bear numbers. In 1951, the AGFC reported that only 40-50 bears remained in the state. Most or all of the remaining bears resided in the lower White River drainage, in the vicinity of Scrubgrass Bayou.

Between 1958 and 1968 approximately 254 bears from Minnesota and Manitoba were released into Arkansas' Interior Highlands. In 1980, after a 52-year prohibition, bear hunting resumed in the Interior Highlands of Arkansas. The objectives of the hunt were to provide recreational opportunity to hunters and to collect biological data that would help manage the black bear as a renewable resource and a game species. Today, AGFC estimates there to be 5,000+ bears in the Interior Highlands. Harvest quotas and season dates have been liberalized in recent years to increase harvest rates closer to 15% rather than 10% to help stabilize the interior highlands population.

The protection that was afforded to the native Arkansas bears of the lower White River drainage promoted population increase and range expansion. Bear sightings have become somewhat common place throughout much of the Gulf Coastal Plain and Lower Mississippi Alluvial Plain. The Delta zones (5 and 5A) still maintain a fairly limited season and quota to allow expansion of the White River population into the Gulf Coastal Plain and Lower Mississippi Alluvial Plain. The objectives for these physiographic regions (Bear Zones 3 and 4) are to collect biological data, reduce bear-human conflicts, and eventually provide recreational hunting opportunities. Current population estimates suggest that 500+ bears reside in the Delta region and an annual harvest of up to 8% might be sustainable.

2020 Season Framework

The 2020 black bear seasons in Arkansas were:

Archery/Crossbow

Bear Zones 1 and 2: September 26-November 30

Bear Zones 3, 4, 5, 5A 6 and 7: Closed

Muzzleloader

Bear Zones 1 and 2: October 17-25

Bear Zones 3, 4, 5, 5A, 6 and 7: Closed

Modern Gun Youth

Bear Zone 1 and 2: November 7-8

Bear Zones 3, 4, 5, 5A, 6 and 7: Closed

Modern Gun

Bear Zones 1 and 2: November 14-30

Bear Zone 5: November 21-29

Bear Zone 5A: November 21 - December 6

Arkansas' bear hunting zones can be seen in Figure 1. As in all previous seasons, the use of dogs to hunt bears was prohibited. Baiting was allowed on private lands in zones 1, 2, 5, and 5A from 30 days prior to the opening of bear season until the end of bear season. Bear hunting permits were not required. The season bag limit was 1 bear by any method.

The bear harvest quota for archery season in bear zone 1 was 400 bears. The muzzleloader and modern gun quotas for zone 1 were 50 bears for each method. The zone 5 and 5A quotas were 10 and 5 bears, respectively. Bear harvest quotas were established in bear zones 1, 5 and 5A to prevent over-harvesting bears. Bear season would close within zones 1, 5 or 5A prior to the end of the scheduled season if the harvest quota was reached. Bear harvest in bear zone 2 is more or less self-regulating due to the land ownership dynamic within and adjacent to the Ouachita National Forest. A zone quota for bear zone 2 has never been necessary. Bear hunters in zones 1, 5 and 5A were required to call a toll-free AGFC phone number (1-800-440-1477) prior to going afield to determine if the season remained open in those zones. The harvest information for Zones 1, 5 and 5A was updated daily during each season.

Tagging and Checking Requirements

Option 1: Immediately upon taking a bear, hunters must check their harvested bear online, via AGFC website.

Option 2: Fill out the game tag provided in the guidebook in ink. After tagging the bear, hunters must call game check hotline within 24 hours to check the bear.

After checking their bear, hunters will be sent a premolar package for a premolar tooth from their bear. Successful hunters must submit a premolar from their harvested bear within seven days after they receive their premolar package to fulfill their game check requirements.

Results

Six hundred sixty five bears were legally harvested during the 2020 season. The 2020 bear harvest was the highest harvest on record since 1980 (Figure 2). Three hundred forty eight males (52%), 317 females (48%) were harvested statewide (Table 1) (Figure 3). The majority of the bears were harvested with archery/crossbow equipment (536 bears; 81%) followed by muzzleloader (77 bears; 12%), and modern gun (52 bears; 8%) (Table 1).

Bear zone 1 produced the majority of the harvested bear with 458 (69%) (Figure 3). Three hundred ninety three bears (86%) in zone 1 were harvested with archery equipment. Muzzleloader and modern gun accounted for 10% and 4%, respectively. Two hundred bears (30%) were harvested in Bear Zone 2. The Bear Zone 2 harvest breakdown was similar to Bear Zone 1 with 71%, 16 % and 13% coming from archery, muzzleloader and modern Gun. Bear Zones 5 produced 6 (0.01%) bears while Bear Zone 5A only produced 1 bear. Harvest sex ratios for zones 1, 2, 5 and 5A were 242 m: 216 f, 105 m: 95 f, 1 m: 5 f, and 0 m: 1 f, respectively (Figure 4).

Bears were harvested in 38 counties (Figure 4). The top 5 counties for bear harvest included Newton with 69 bears, followed by Searcy with 55 bears, Van Buren with 51 bears, Johnson 46 bears, and Polk with 43 bears. (Figure 4).

The top 3 counties for bear harvest in Zone 1 included Newton, Searcy and Van Buren. The top 3 counties for bear harvest in Zone 2 were Polk, Scott and Yell (Figure 4).

Discussion

The 2020 statewide bear harvest (665 bears) is the highest harvest year since modern-day bear hunting began in 1980. Harvest was high most likely due to two factors: a moderate to poor mast crop (of white oaks) and a dramatic increase in the Bear Zone 1 harvest quota from 340 bears to 500 bears. Statewide male/female harvest ratios (52% to 48%) look normal with males typically being slightly higher. Reported harvest on private lands was 551 or 83%. More than likely, nearly 100% of the bears reported harvested on private land, especially with archery equipment, were harvested over bait. When mast availability is sparse, bears utilize bait sites more. However, despite the sparse mast crop and dramatic increase in the Bear Zone 1 quota, the bear zone 1 harvest quota was not met this year. This was likely due to the case that most bears (especially females) probably entered their den cycle prior to the modern gun seasons. Sparse mast years do encourage bears to use bait sites more readily, however, it can also trigger bears to enter a den cycle much earlier than normal to avoid having energy deficits while foraging. The vast majority of bears are typically harvested with archery equipment early in the season structure, however muzzleloader and modern gun harvests are still significant.

The land ownership component of bear zone 1 continues to necessitate the need for a quota. I do think the bear population in Zone 1, and to some extent in Zone 2, continues to increase and expand. Further liberalization of harvest strategies for Zone 1 and Zone 2 are most likely still warranted. Being that 71% of the bears harvested in Zone 1 were taken with archery equipment, an increase in the archery quota for Zone 1 will be the most effective means to increase harvest rates.

Figure 1. Arkansas black bear management zones, 2020. Bear hunting was allowed in Zones 1, 2, 5, and 5A.

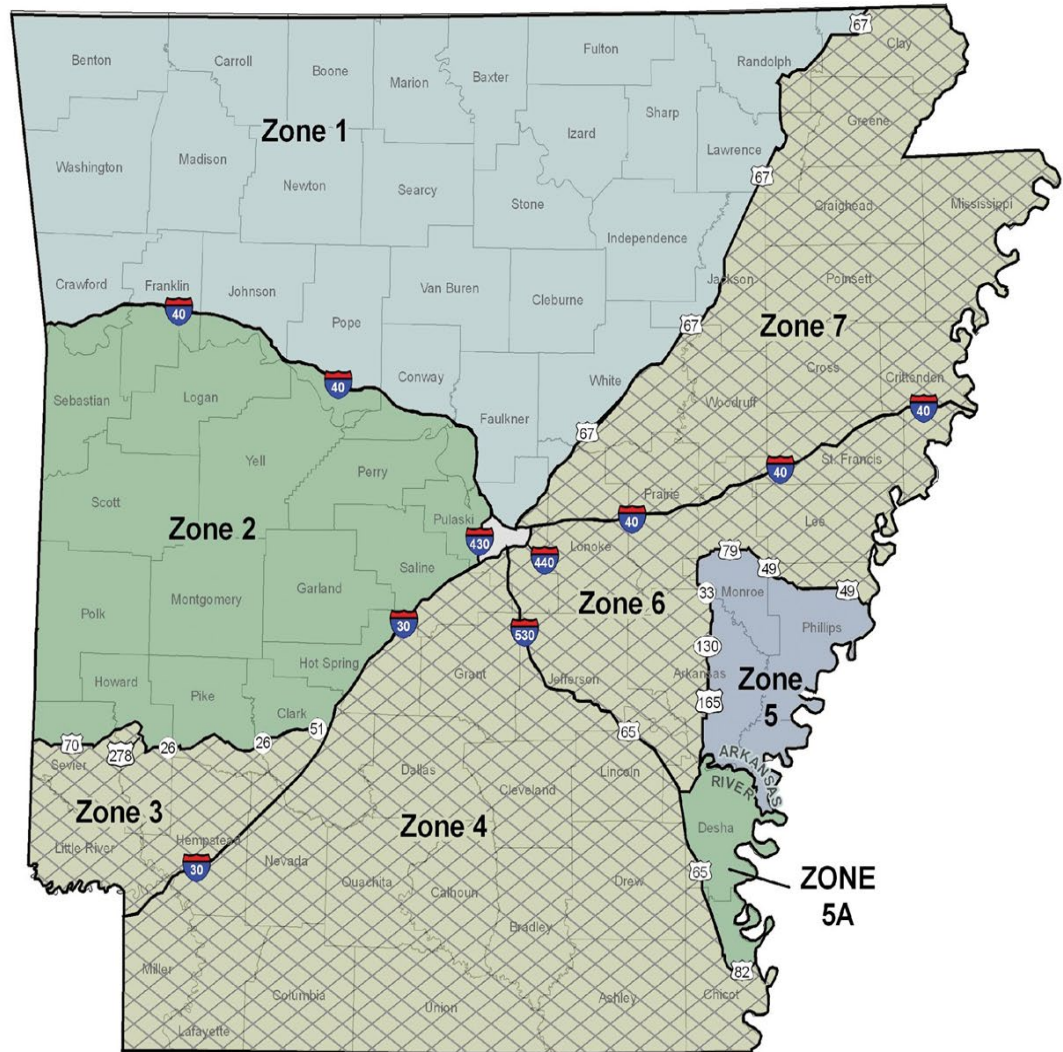


Figure 2. Arkansas black bear harvest, 2000-2020.

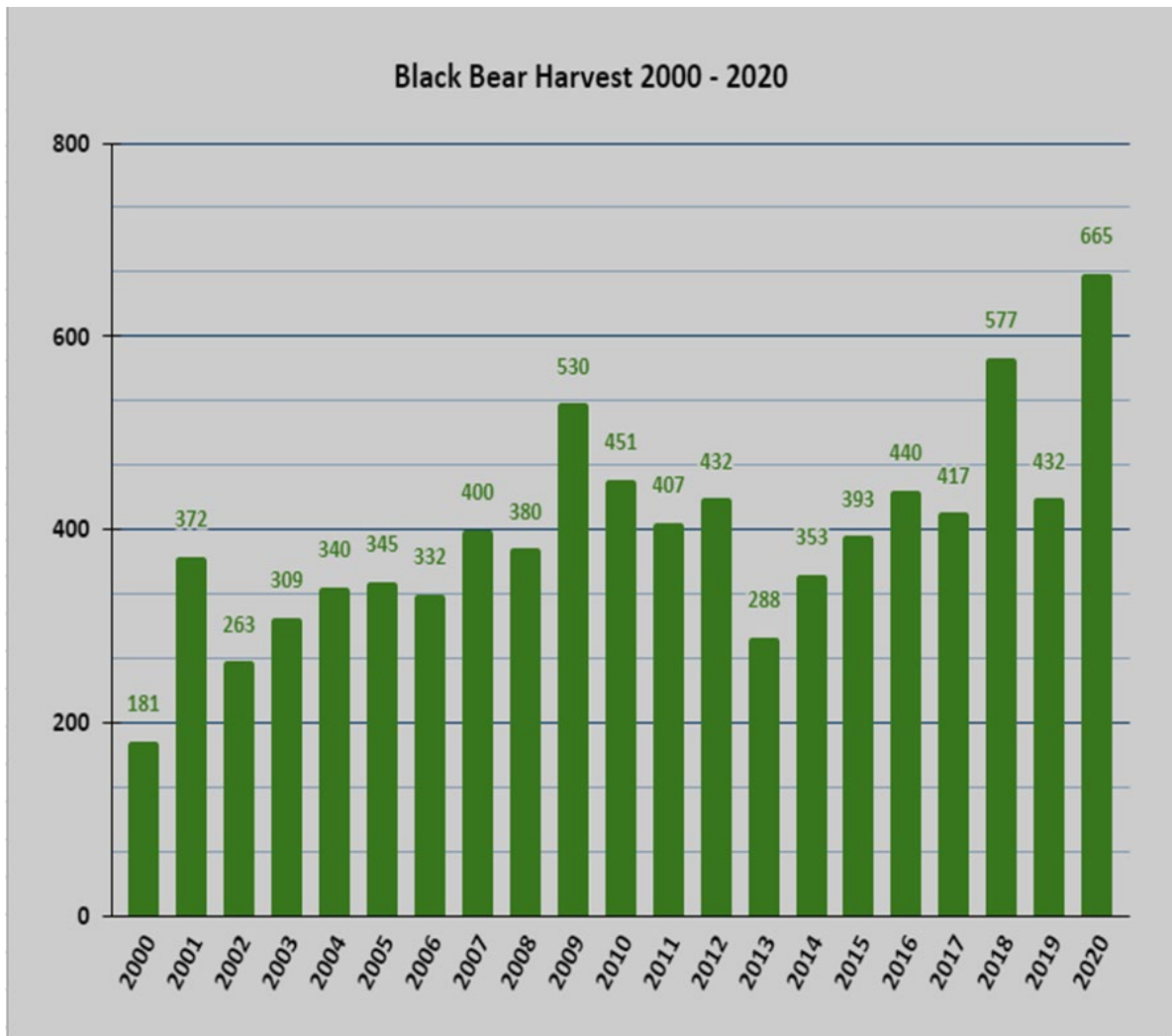


Table 1. Arkansas black bear harvest by bear zone, sex, and method, 2020.

	Total Harvest	Male	Female	Archery	Muzzleloader	Modern Gun
Zone 1	458	242	216	393	45	20
Zone 2	200	105	95	142	31	27
Zone 5	6	1	5	1	1	4
Zone 5A	1	0	1	0	0	1

Figure 3. Arkansas black bear harvest by method and bear zone, 2020.

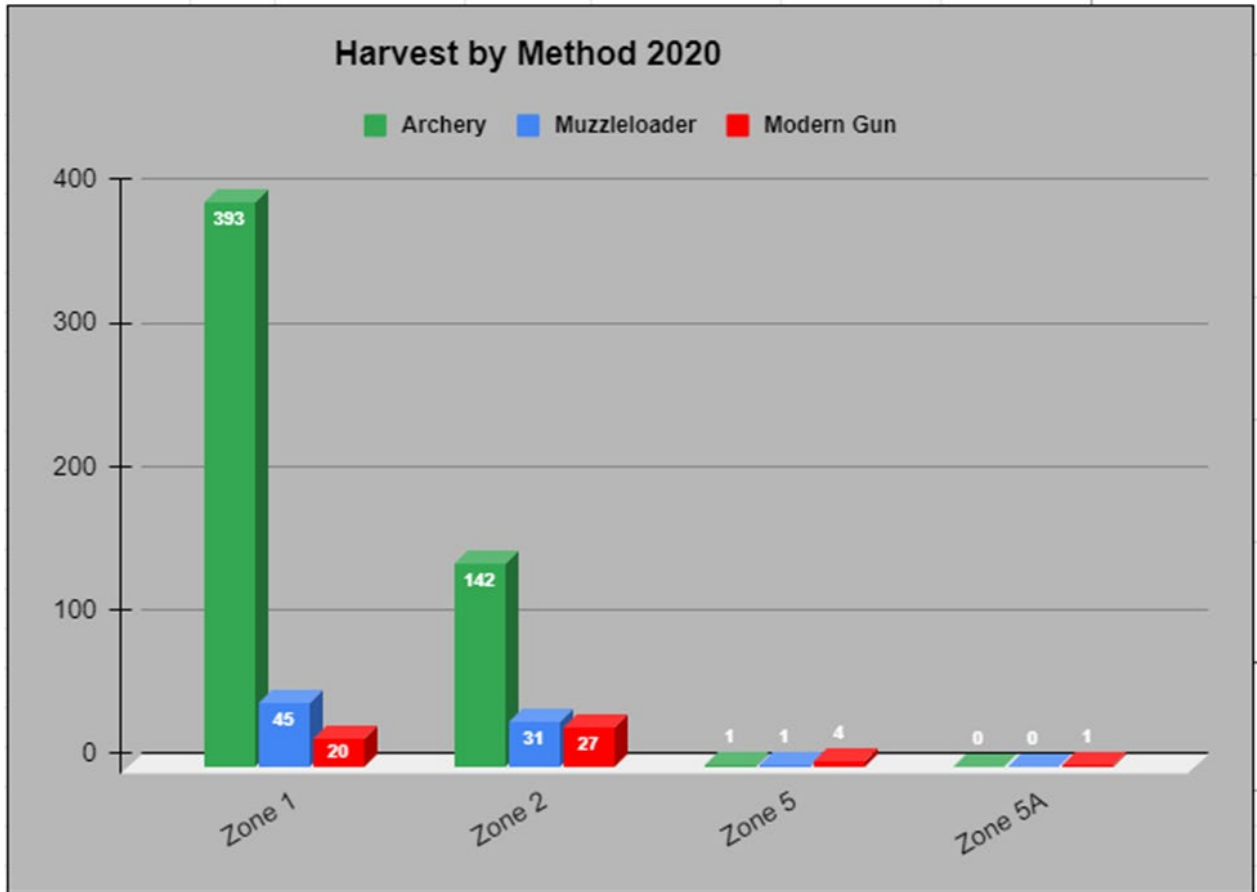


Figure 4. Arkansas black bear harvest by sex and zone, 2020.

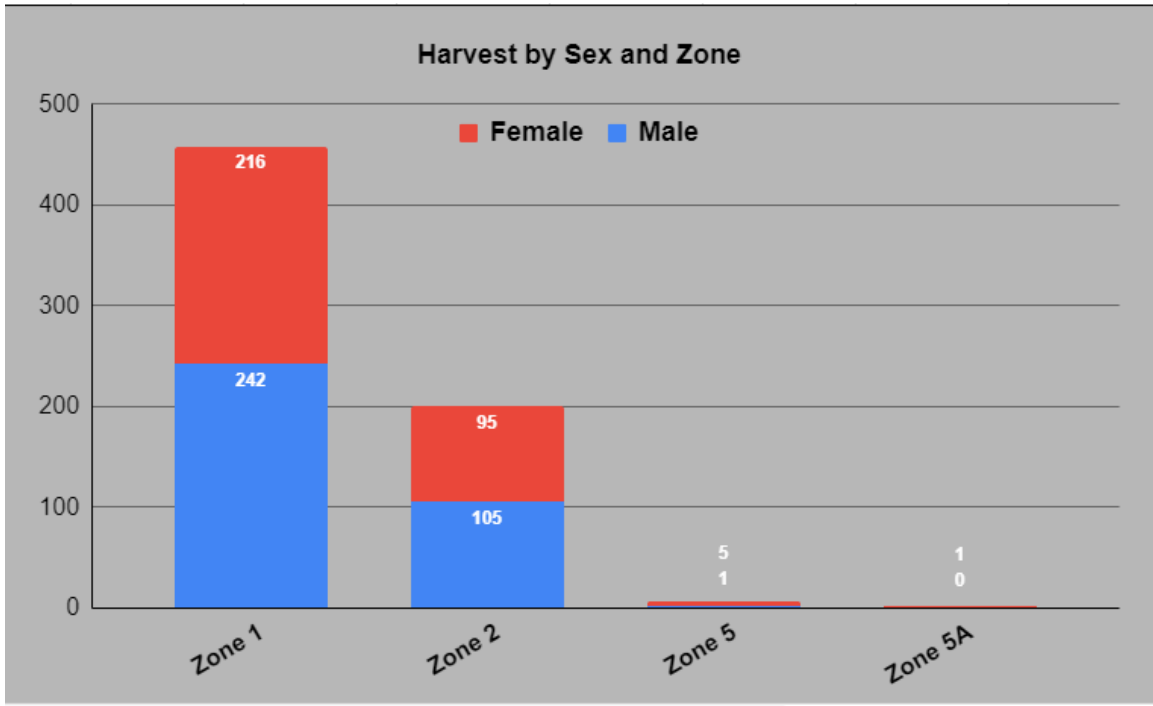


Figure 4. Arkansas black bear harvest by county for 2020.

