

Tips for Still Hunting Black Bears in Tennessee

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Increases in harvest, bait station surveys, nuisance complaints, roadkills, and bear-human encounters in Tennessee all indicate that bear numbers are as high as they have ever been in the last 150 years. Due to the increase in the number of bears in Tennessee, the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency (TWRA) has expanded opportunities for bear hunting in 2007 by adding a two week archery season and extending the November season. These changes

promise unprecedented opportunities for hunting black bears.

The majority of black bear hunting in Tennessee occurs on the 640,000 acre Cherokee National Forest (CNF) located in 11 East Tennessee counties. The majority of our bears harvested in Tennessee have traditionally been with the use of hounds. The art of “still hunting” (i.e., stalking or ambushing and hunting without the use of dogs) has not yet reached its full potential for harvesting bears in Tennessee.

To harvest a black bear in Tennessee by still hunting methods is no doubt quite a challenge and a feat that is not easily accomplished. To be successful, still hunters will have to commit themselves to the challenge and be persistent. Below are just a few tips that will increase your chances for harvesting a bear in Tennessee.

First, I recommend visiting our bear webpage at www.state.tn.us/twra/bearmain.html get familiar with the history, current range, location of sanctuaries, biology, harvest, and the management of bears in Tennessee. This will greatly increase your knowledge of bears in the state.

Next, selecting areas that offer the best chances of harvesting bears is the key to success. To determine the appropriate hunting areas, you will need to purchase maps that illustrate boundaries, roads, topography, coordinates (preferably UTM coordinates), and ensure that your maps are at the appropriate scale (e.g., 1:63,000). National Geographic maps have all these attributes and can be purchased at www.nationalgeographic.com for \$9.95. The following three maps cover the entire CNF:

- 781 Tellico and Ocoee Rivers Trail Map
- 782 French Broad & Nolichucky Rivers Trail Map
- 783 South Holston & Watauga Lakes Trail Map

Because the highest bear densities in Tennessee likely occur within our bear sanctuaries, then a good strategy is to select hunting areas near, or on the fringes of bear reserves. Highlighting these areas with a Sharpie Pen is highly recommended.

Another critical aspect of hunting success is the characteristics of the area you hunt. Research has shown an indirect relationship between bear use of an area and the amount of human activity occurring in these areas; that is bears tend to avoid areas where human activity is high, or use these areas only at times that humans aren't around.

Finding travel corridors used by bears will greatly increase the chances of harvesting a bear. Again, CNF roads and trails with little to no human activity are travel corridors for bears. Roads open to vehicles offer low probability of seeing a bear.

After highlighting bear sanctuaries, remote areas, and probable travel corridors for bears on your maps, the next step is to intensively scout these areas for bears. There is a direct relationship between a hunter's success and the time spent in the woods scouting and increasing knowledge of areas he/she hunts. Keep in mind that scouting can be done year round when doing other recreational activities in the CNF (e.g., hiking, camping, picnicking, fishing, ect.). When scouting for bears, a well developed "search image" for bear sign (e.g., tracks, mark trees, scat, torn up logs and bees nest, etc.) can be much more informative and useful than attempts to actually see a bear.

For early-season archery hunting, scout for areas having natural fall foods that bears favor (e.g., acorns, grapes, blackgum, and wild cherry), and concentrate your hunting near these areas. Bear scat will be clear evidence of bears using these areas. Analyzing the contents of bear scats can give you clear evidence of what bears are eating at the time and what areas bears might frequently visit. Analyzing scats is usually quite easy because seeds are readily identifiable. Oak mast is a highly preferred food by bears; learn to recognize freshly broken tree limbs in the fall, clear evidence of bears foraging. Knowledge of bear diets and their preferred foods, therefore, can point you to the right areas to hunt. Finally, keep in mind that bear diets are seasonal; i.e., bears will not be eating blueberries in fall.

A second early-season archery strategy would be to find travel corridors used by bears (e.g., trails, closed roads, and ridge tops) and concentrate hunting in these areas. Bear tracks (or depressions) and/or scat will also be good evidence of bears using these trails. Travel corridors that connect to foraging areas could be key areas for hunting bears.

Importantly, mid (November) followed by the late seasons (December) offer the best opportunities for still hunters to harvest bears in Tennessee. The use of firearms and increased visibility due to leaf fall significantly increases the probability a hunter will harvest a bear.

The opportunities to harvest a bear are better during the mid season compared to the late bear hunting season. As the hunting season progresses, there are fewer bears available due to harvest. Secondly, pregnant females den significantly earlier than other bears, usually around late November to early December, depending on bear's individual condition. If fall food resources have been good, then it is expected that pregnant females will be in the den by December and unavailable for harvest.

Importantly, do not limit your still hunting efforts for bears only to hunting seasons where dogs are not allowed. I highly recommend still hunting for bears when dog hunting for bears is ongoing. The key to still hunting for bears during seasons where dogs are allowed is to hunt areas where dog hunters are unlikely to be. Dog hunters typically will be hunting main roads and areas that can be traversed by vehicles, which aren't particularly suitable for still hunting anyway. Bears being hunted with hounds will either avoid or move to remote areas where they are not harassed by hounds. Thus, dog hunters may indirectly create harvest opportunities for still hunters. As a cautionary note, it would not be ethical for a still hunter to harvest a bear that is obviously being pursued or treed by a pack of hounds.

In contrast to techniques used during archery hunting for bears, strategies for mid and late season still hunters are simple; just hunt while walking remote trails and/or CNF roads closed (i.e., gated) to vehicles. Importantly, do not limit yourself to hunting out of a tree stand. Rather just "quietly slip" along closed roads and/or trails. This will greatly increase your chances of seeing bears. I regularly see bears every year walking trails while conducting our annual bait station surveys for bears in Tennessee. CNF roads closed to vehicles are numerous and provide easy access for hunters. Hunt roads with the least human activity and your chances of encountering a bear will increase with each mile walked.

Whether you are archery or gun hunting for bears, concentrate hunting efforts during early morning and late afternoon hours. Bears are "crepuscular" i.e., most active during morning and evening.

In summary still hunters can increase their chances for harvesting bears in Tennessee by following these few simple tips:

- Accept the challenge and be persistent.
- Visit our bear webpage at www.state.tn.us/twra/bearmain.html to increase your knowledge about bears and their management in Tennessee.
- Purchase appropriate maps for hunting the CNF.
- Map and scout bear sanctuary fringes, remote areas, closed roads, and trails.
- Select areas having abundant bear sign and activity with minimal human disturbance.
- Hunt areas where bears are foraging.
- Hunt bear travel corridors especially during the mid and late firearm seasons.
- Hunt during dog hunting seasons.
- Hunt during early morning and late afternoon hours when bears are most active.

Finally, even if your recreational efforts have been unsuccessful in harvesting a bear, the times spent in the woods are certainly better than times spent at work. Furthermore, use the knowledge you gained and apply it to the following year for still hunting bears in Tennessee. Your persistence will pay off.