

# MBHA works to protect black bear population

BY BILL PARKER  
STAFF WRITER

The Michigan Bear Hunters Association was established in 1946 by Carl T. Johnson, an avid hound hunter and former commissioner of the Natural Resources Commission. MBHA is dedicated to protecting Michigan's population of black bears and the sport of bear hunting.

Although MBHA was founded by a houndsman, membership in the 500 member organization is not limited to hound hunters, according to current president, Bill Walker, a Bloomfield Hills resident. Walker admits, however, that about 80 percent of the nearly 500 members statewide are avid hound hunters. The other 20 percent is comprised of bait hunters.

"Through the years, Michigan Bear Hunters has lobbied the DNR to protect bears and the sport of bear hunting," explained Walker. "We lobbied for a bill to make it illegal to kill bear cubs. We lobbied to limit the number of dogs you can run at one time to six, and we've lobbied for other regulations such as a separate bear season and a separate bear license."

MBHA is not only active in the political aspect of the sport, but it provides financial support for research and other programs as well. MBHA donated \$2,500 to the Michigan Department of Natural Resources to assist in a radio-collared bear research program in the north central Upper

Peninsula. The program will help the DNR learn more about the black bear reproduction rate, survival rate and other population dynamics, critical bear habitat and general bear biology. MBHA has also put up a \$500 reward to help fight bear poaching in the state.

"In the early '70s hound hunters practically had the woods to themselves," explained Walker. "The sport has really become popular in recent years."

Prior to 1990 anyone could purchase a bear hunting license. In the early 1980s there were close to 8,000 bear hunters in the state while that number rose to nearly 12,000 hunters by 1989. The DNR instituted a lottery system to distribute bear licenses in 1990.

There were 9,820 applications that year and 4,191 harvest permits were issued. Hunters took 555 bear. In 1991, 5,519 harvest permits were distributed between 9,195 applicants and 1,037 bear were killed. This season, 11,695 applications were received by the DNR and 5,155 harvest permits were issued.

The DNR estimates Michigan has a bear population of between 6,000 and 9,000 animals.

"We're probably closer to 9,000," said Walker. "The reason is that I don't think we're harvesting more than 15 percent of the population. The age of the bears being harvested and the size of the bears being harvested indicate a healthy bear population."



BILL PARKER/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Searching for sign: Michigan Bear Hunters Association president Bill Walker, of Bloomfield Hills, looks for fresh bear tracks during a recent hunt in Houghton County.

## Bear hunt from page 1B

I felt pretty good about my running ability, until the third day of the hunt. By then the swamps, underbrush, log piles and hills left my legs feeling like worn out rubber bands. I was sure someone had tied bricks to the bottom of my shoes.

When you're chasing the song of a howling hound through a swamp so thick you can't see 10 feet ahead of you and the frigid water numbs your feet and legs, you begin to cherish the chance to run through the ridges in dry, open hardwoods. But once you get into the ridges, panting like a marathoner headed into the final mile, your legs turning to putty as the sound of the hounds fades in the distance, the slower pace of swamp running seems like a better alternative. Surprisingly though, the rush of Adrenalin keeps you in the chase.

### On the right track

The hunt begins the night before when hunters drag a plow-like mechanism to loosen dirt on the shoulder of nearby roads and two-tracks. At first light, the hunters drive slowly along these roads looking for fresh bear tracks in the loose soil.

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Our group located four sets of bear tracks that had crossed the road the night before. Walker drew a circle around one of the prints but I still couldn't see it, and I thought I had pretty good tracking eyes.

A bear walks on the pads of its feet with its claws retracted. Dog deer even fox tracks are easy to see compared to those of a black bear.

I was amazed at the ability of these hunters to find bear and other tracks while rolling along in the pre-dawn hours at 5- to 10-miles per hour. At one point, Keith Huff, who ran the hunt, tracked a bear down the side of a road and into the brush.

"I can't even see the tracks on the road, Keith," I admitted. "How can you tell where he went back into the woods?"

"See right here where the grass

is patted down?" he asked, pointing to what looked like nothing unusual to me.

"Not really," I stammered. "Well, believe me, he went in right here."

Moments later, one of the dogs sniffed the tracks and followed them into the woods right where Huff said they went.

Although I never met Sitting Bull I have to believe these houndsmen could have taught him a thing or two on the art of tracking.

### A close encounter

Once a set of tracks is found, dogs are put on the trail to see if they can smell the scent. If a fresh scent — or cold trail — is found, the dogs begin barking as they take off along the trail. Sometimes the hounds lose the trail and never catch up with the bear, but if they jump the bear and take off on a "hot trail" the intensity of the race speeds up. The hounds

go crazy.

Walker and I had been on one cold trail for the better part of an hour when the dogs seemed to lose the scent. All of a sudden one of the dogs ran into a small thicket 10-yards to our right.

With brush crashing and the hounds howling in earnest a bear rammed out the backside of the thicket. A hot chase began as a cold chill shivered through my body. At that instant I experienced the thrill of the chase — I didn't even actually see the bear, but I knew he was very close.

Often times — as was the case in this chase — the bear loses the hounds, either by backtracking, outrunning the hounds or running off into private land.

We started nine tracks during my hunt and only treed four bears. Once the bear climbs a tree the hunt and the thrill is over. Then the decision is made by the group whether to kill the bear or not, depending on its sex and size. Of the four bears we treed, our group only killed two — a 291-pound bear and a 226-pound bear.

The wet, cold conditions are less than ideal and the days are long and hard, but I have to admit my first bear hunt was the most fun I've had in the rain.

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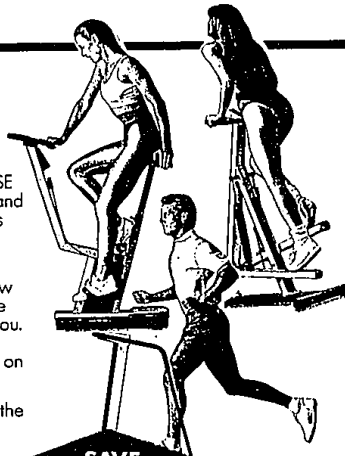
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