



State of California

Natural Resources Agency

Department of Fish and Wildlife



2025 Black Bear Program Annual Report

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Arjun Dheer, Statewide Black Bear Coordinator

Wildlife Branch

1010 Riverside Parkway

West Sacramento, CA 95605

Director's Note

The California Department of Fish and Wildlife is pleased to release the 2025 Black Bear Program Annual Report. Black bears hold a cherished place in California's wild landscapes, and we are appreciative of the many ways Californians demonstrate their respect for these magnificent animals — through thoughtful outdoor recreation, responsible wildlife stewardship, coexistence practices, and strong support for science-based conservation. This report reflects the Department's commitment to managing black bears for the benefit of all Californians, drawing on the latest population science and state-of-the-art scientific analyses of the state's black bear populations. We hope this report serves as a resource and that it deepens understanding and appreciation for a species that inspires a wide range of viewpoints and meaning.

Meghan Hertel, Director

California Department of Fish and Wildlife

Introduction

In 2025, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) published its new Black Bear Conservation and Management Plan for California (Bear Plan; CDFW 2025a).

In accordance with the state's policy for wildlife resources (Fish and Game Code Section 1801), the mission of the Department, and as defined in the Bear Plan, the two goals of CDFW's Black Bear Program are:

- a) To conserve and manage black bear populations that are ecologically functional, disease-resilient, genetically diverse statewide and regionally, and conserve and enhance their habitats; and
- b) To provide opportunities for black bear hunting, viewing, and public education; minimize human-black bear conflict; consider animal welfare in black bear conservation and management; and be inclusive of all Californians in black bear conservation and management decisions.

In accordance with these goals, CDFW's Black Bear Program is using an adaptive management framework to conserve and manage California's black bears. To attain these goals, CDFW strives to conserve and manage the needs of black bears for their intrinsic ecological values with the diverse economic and recreational needs of the people of California, while minimizing human-black bear conflict (HBC). This report will focus on population monitoring and harvest statistics, but not on HBC (see below).

For the state to meet these goals, the Legislature has delegated the power to regulate the take and possession of black bears - amongst other wildlife - to the California Fish and Game Commission. In 1957, the Commission initiated a tag reporting system for black bears taken in California. The black bear harvest tag reporting system enables the Department to monitor both the black bear population and hunter's black bear hunting patterns by collecting harvest attributes via a self-administered questionnaire.

Since 1982, all black bear tag holders have been required to return their black bear harvest report tags to the Department whether or not they successfully took a black bear. Since 2013, successful black bear hunters have been able to complete their tag questionnaire on-line through the Department's Automated

License Data System (ALDS). Age data are obtained from premolar teeth extracted from hunter-killed black bears. The age-at-harvest data provide direct insight into the age structure of black bears taken during the season.

Prior to 2024, CDFW's Black Bear Program published annual "Take Reports", which focused on take data and used a less contemporary population index and monitoring matrix (Fraser 1976). The Interim Black Bear Take Report 2021-2023 (CDFW 2025b) served as a bridge between the old Take Reports and the new Annual Reports which integrate multiple streams of information into one. This document, the 2025 Black Bear Program Annual Report, is the first of its kind and expands on the Interim Black Bear Take Report 2021-2023. It will be of interest to biologists, hunters, advocates, and members of the general public interested in black bear conservation and management.

The Bear Plan calls for management of black bears according to Bear Conservation Regions (BCR), and stipulates that the Annual Report on the status of California black bear populations will include estimates and trends for population sizes, vital rates, harvest statistics at the BCR scale as presented below. This report also must discuss emerging conservation or management issues and identify areas requiring new, focused research to further investigate those issues.

Integrated Population Model Update

CDFW estimates black bear population size using an Integrated Population Model (IPM) that makes use of age at harvest data and auxiliary data from widespread camera trapping surveys, local density estimates, and informative prior distributions for vital rates (Table 1; Figure 1). For age at harvest data, a premolar tooth is removed from harvested black bears for age determination, which is one factor used to estimate the total population size within the Bear Conservation Regions (BCRs; Figure 2). Teeth are sent to an independent laboratory in Montana for age determination by counting cementum annuli.

The IPM was published in a peer-reviewed scientific journal in 2025 (Connor et al., 2025). The only difference between the modeling approach in this document compared to that publication is the addition of 2024 age at harvest data in this version. The statewide population size estimate provided below for 2020-2024 represents a roughly 3% population size increase at the point estimate relative to the 2019-2023 point-estimate. Yet, there is no evidence of a statistically significant trend in population size in any BCR or statewide. Thus,

California's black bear population is best described as being stable. As new data become available, the point estimate and credible intervals in the IPM's outputs are likely fluctuate, but this does not necessarily mean that there is a statistically significant trend.

Population Monitoring

GPS Collaring

Between January 2024 and December 2025, CDFW deployed GPS collars on over 200 black bears across the state to inform its IPM with California-sourced vital rates data. The GPS collars provide essential information regarding survival, reproductive performance, intra- and interspecific interactions, the effects of environmental variables (e.g., climate change, drought, fire, food) on black bear behavior and fitness, home ranges, dispersal, habitat use, conflict hotspots, and more. This immense collaring effort has been a concentrated “pulse” to collect these data.

Following this, a smaller number of black bears (mostly sows, or adult females) will continue to be collared/marked on an annual basis to continue collecting vital rates data and calibrate estimates from non-invasive survey methods such as hair snares, fecal DNA transects, and camera traps.

Preliminary California-sourced vital rates data will be presented in the 2026 Black Bear Program Annual Report and will be added to the IPM framework in future Annual Reports.

Den Checks

Since winter 2023-2024, CDFW has conducted dozens of den checks to collect accurate, verified vital rates data from the field. Den checks also function as an effective way to mark animals and to assess collar fit, animal welfare, and animal health. Data are collected using a data sheet and CDFW biologists use specific protocols to support the collection of scientifically robust data and to safeguard human safety and animal welfare. Sows are the priority demographic for den checks, but they are also conducted on boars (adult males) and rehabilitated yearlings to check welfare and collect data on denning behavior.

Camera Trapping

A semi-automated process was developed to set cameras at areas of interest for biologists to collect and record data related to camera deployment locations, lengths, and checks. Camera traps have been set at dens, trap sites, and other areas of high black bear activity such as stomp trails, animal carcasses, and marking trees. Photos are centrally stored, and vital rates data are being extracted from the photos for future addition to the IPM. Additionally, millions of camera trap photos are being leveraged from other projects focused on other species being conducted by CDFW staff and collaborators. These photos of black bears are frequent “by-catch”.

Observations and Visual Counts

Another semi-automated process was developed for the visual counts method, which involves the use of GPS data and VHF telemetry to locate sows with cubs or yearlings to collect data on litter size, survival, and reproductive rates. Data collected from these visual counts will be inputted into the IPM and priors regarding litter size and other variables will be updated beginning in 2026. This approach is also being used for incidental sightings of black bears during fieldwork and is being coupled with data mining from social media, including iNaturalist, Instagram, and other social media platforms. CDFW's Black Bear Program is currently developing ways to make use of these data from unmarked black bears for population monitoring.

Table 1. 5-year (2020-2024) average population size estimates, harvest totals, harvest rates, and mean lambdas for each Bear Conservation Region (BCR) in California.

BCR	Population size estimate (90% CI)	Harvest	Harvest rate (%)	Lambda (90% CI)
Hunted				
North Coast	22,591 (16,839-28,093)	449	1.60-2.67	0.98 (0.95-1.02)
Cascade	13,691 (9,960-17,292)	181	1.05-1.82	1.02 (0.99-1.05)
Northern Sierra	11,453 (8,425-14,444)	266	1.84-3.16	0.99 (0.96-1.02)

BCR	Population size estimate (90% CI)	Harvest	Harvest rate (%)	Lambda (90% CI)
Southern Sierra	7,341 (5,485-9,171)	266	2.90-4.85	0.96 (0.92-1.00)
Transverse Ranges	1,605 (1,103-2,079)	54	2.60-4.90	0.97 (0.94-1.01)
Not hunted				
Northeastern California	2,263 (1,644-2,886)			
Central Coast	1,659 (1,261-2,039)			
South Coast	491 (368-614)			
Inland Deserts	235 (168-301)			
Statewide	61,329 (49,720-72,660)	1,216	1.67-2.45	1.00 (0.99-1.02)

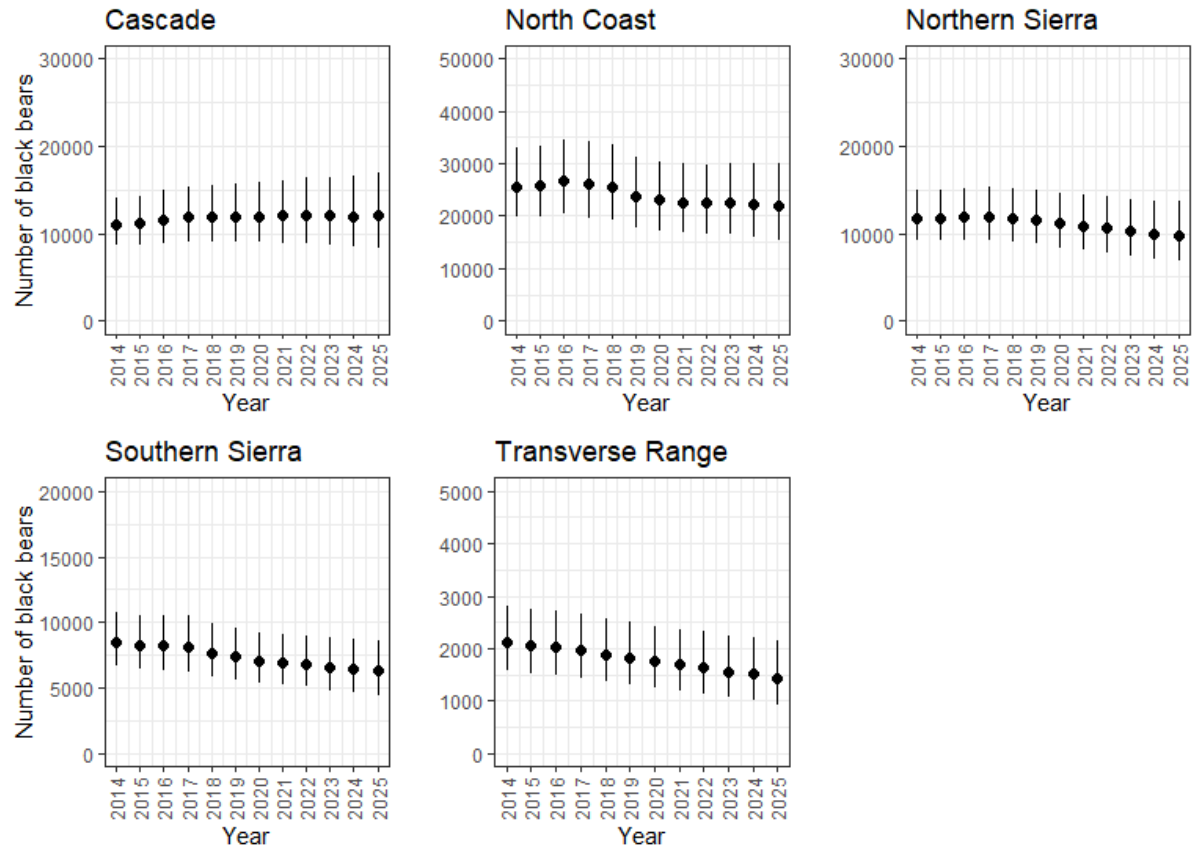


Figure 1. Population trend plots for the five hunting Bear Conservation Regions (BCRs) in California from 2014-2025.

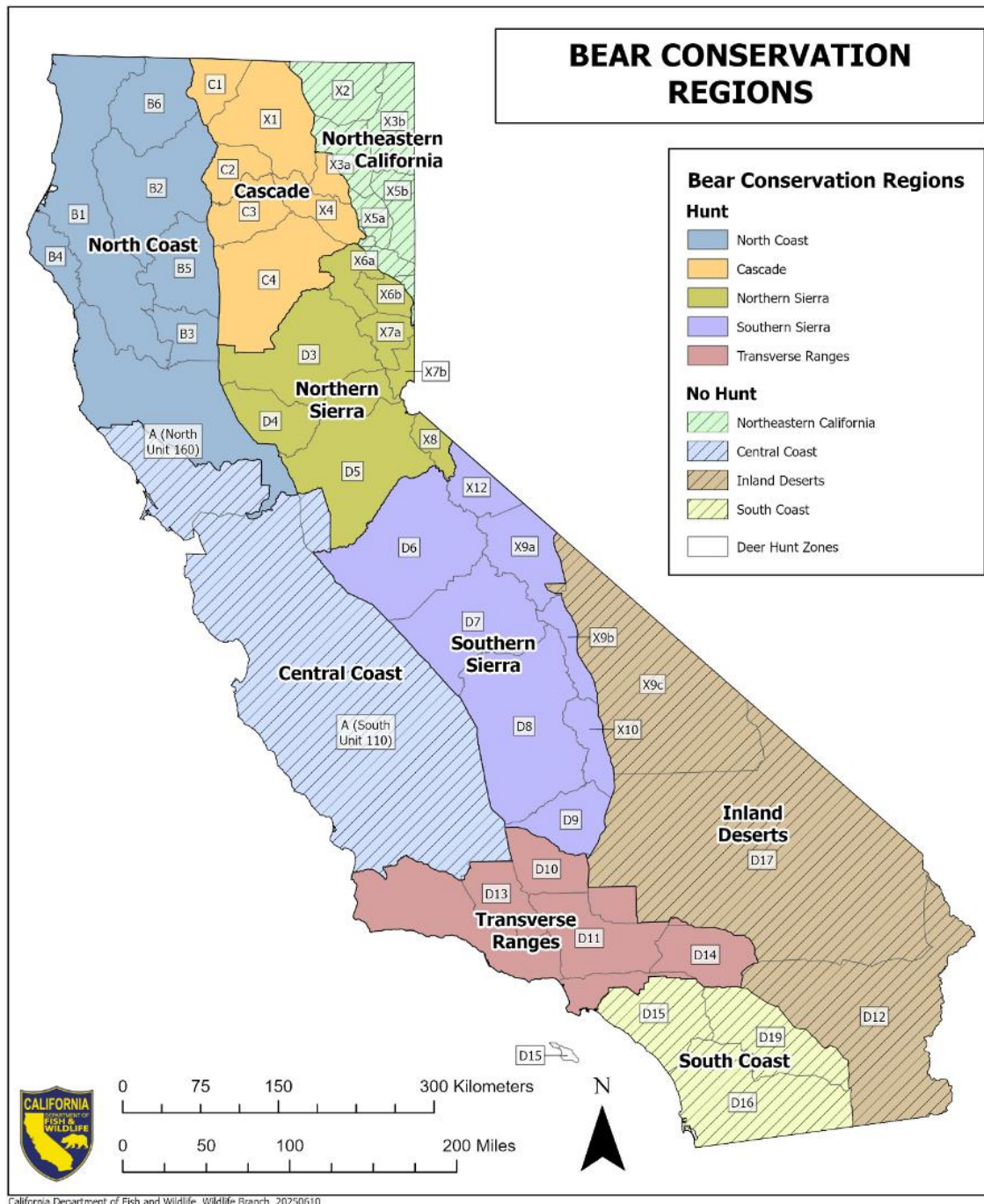


Figure 2. Map of California's Bear Conservation Regions (BCRs) as of 2025.

Conservation and Management

Summary of 2024 Black Bear Hunting Regulations

The 2024 general black bear seasons opened concurrently with the opening of the general deer season in the A, B, C, D, X8, X9a, X9b, X10 and X12 deer hunting zones. In the remaining portions of the state where black bear hunting is permissible, the general black bear season opened on the second Saturday in October. Additionally, persons possessing a valid black bear tag were able to hunt during a 23-day archery-only season from mid-August to early September. Pursuant California Code of Regulations Title 14 § 365, because the threshold of 1,700 was not reached, the 2024 general black bear season closed on the last Sunday of December, which was December 29. There was no limit on black bear tag sales. The bag and possession limit is one black bear per hunter. Black bear cubs (defined as black bears less than one year of age or weighing less than 50 pounds), and females with cubs may not be taken. On 01/01/2013, Fish and Game Code (FGC) § 3960 took effect, making it unlawful to use dogs to hunt black bears.

2024 Hunt Season Results

Season Length

The 2024 archery black bear hunting seasons opened statewide on the third Saturday of August and ran for 21 consecutive days. In the remaining deer hunting X zones, black bear general season commenced on the second Saturday of October. The black bear season closed on the last Sunday in December pursuant to California Code of Regulations, Title 14, Section 365.

Tag Sales

In total, 30,999 black bear hunting tags were sold for the 2024 black bear season. The total consisted of 30,773 resident black bear tags (including Junior) and 226 non-resident black bear tags. Black bear tag sales in 2024 was 4.55% (1,476) lower than 2023 black bear tag sales (32,475) and 4.28% lower than the 2021-2023 average. Non-resident black bear tag sales increased by 21.51% (40) from 2023 sales (186) with resident black bear tag sales decreasing by 4.67% (1,506) from 2023 sales. In total, these changes in tag sales reflect a revenue increase of \$29,606 from 2023.

Total Take and Age and Sex Composition

A total of 979 black bears were harvested during the 2024 hunting season. The 2024 black bear harvest was 25% (326) lower than the 2021-2023 average of 1,305 and marks the lowest black bear harvest on record (Figure 3).

The mean age for black bears harvested during the 2024 hunt season was 6.1 ± 0.2 years and the median age was 5 years. Yearling and 2-year-old black bears were harvested the most often, followed by 4-year-olds. The two oldest harvested black bears were 22 years old. Age results for each tooth were published in a separate document (CDFW 2025c). Of the 979 black bears taken, 576 (58.8%) were male, 327 (33.4%) were female, and 76 (7.8%) harvest report tags did not report sex (Figure 4).

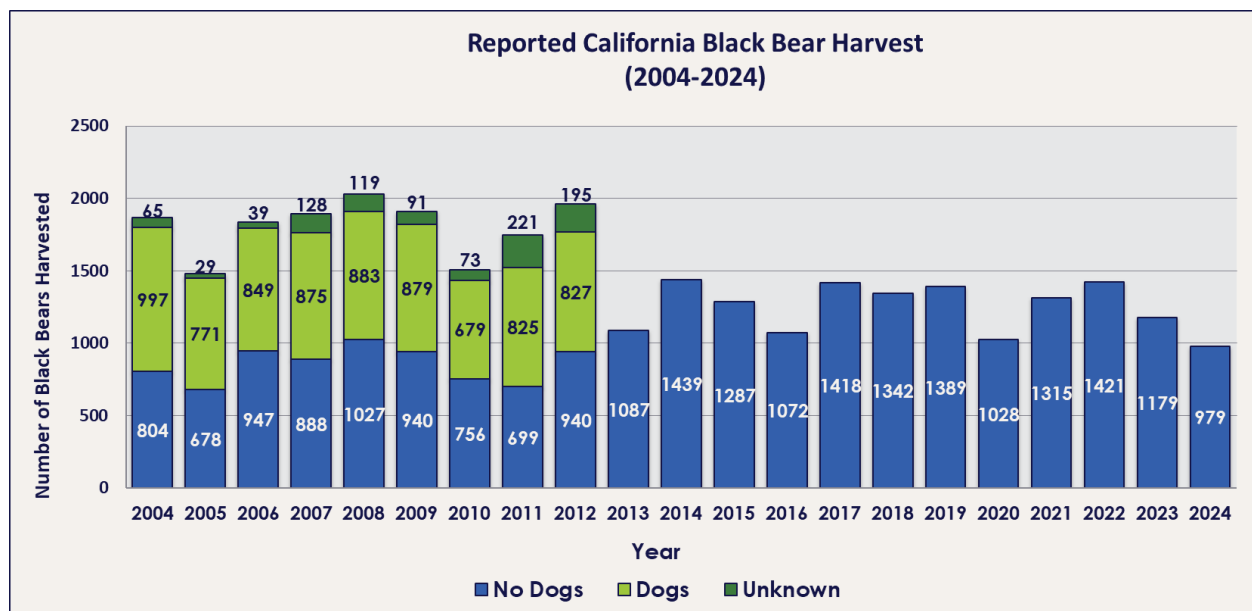


Figure 3: Annual black bear harvest 2004-2024.

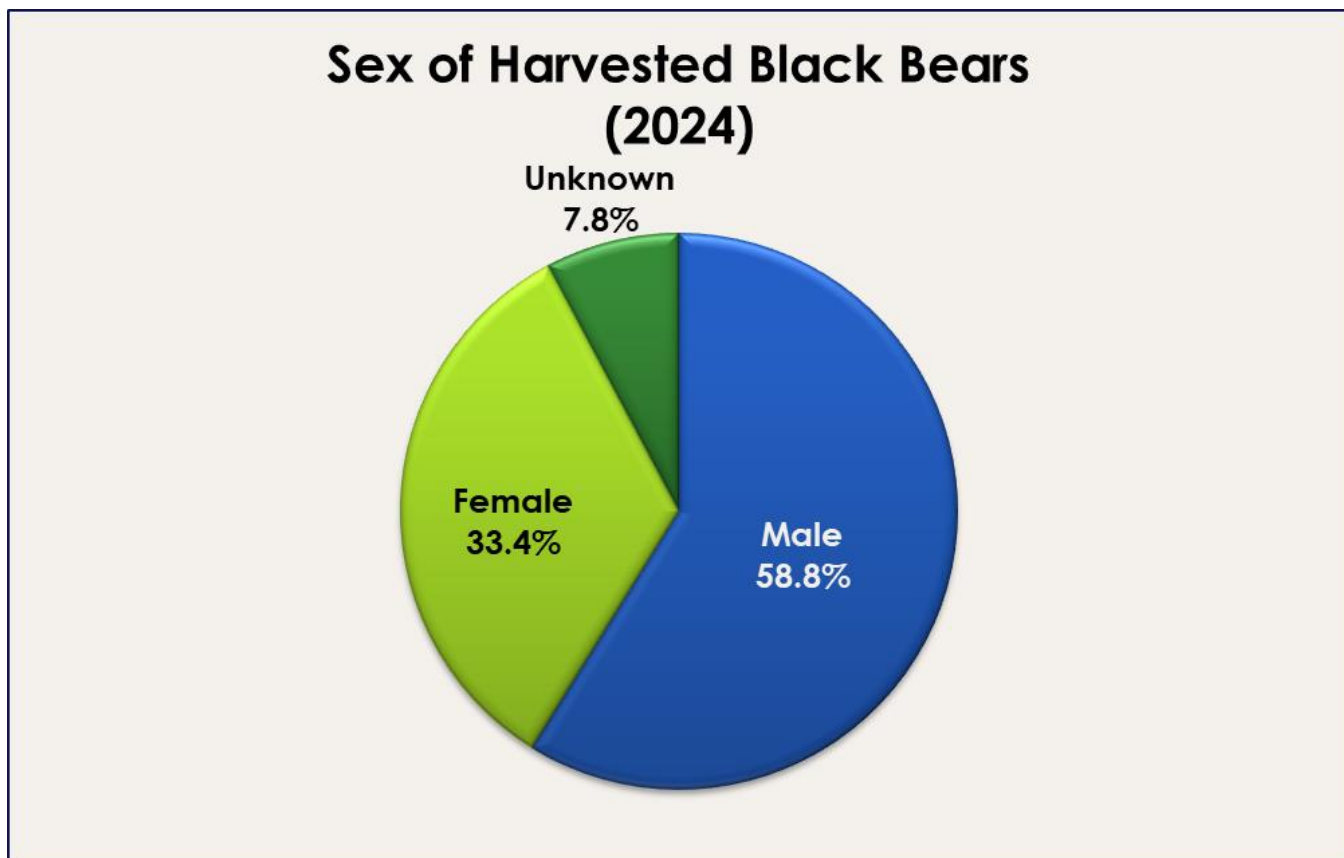


Figure 4: Black bear harvest sex composition during the 2024 hunt season.

Hunter Effort

Similar to previous years, most black bear hunters that were successful in harvesting a black bear spent a week or less afield (Figure 5). Of the successful hunters who reported number of days hunting before take, 25.0% spent a day or less in the field while 51.6% spent 2 to 7 days in the field. The remaining 23.5% reported spending 8 or more days in the field. Successful hunters reporting effort spent an average of 5.5 days in the field before taking a black bear.

Hunters were also asked to report whether a black bear was taken while hunting exclusively for black bears, or while deer hunting, and on the type of weapon they used. Similar to previous years, the 2024 season's hunters who took black bears while concurrently hunting deer accounted for the majority (53.1%) of the total harvest scenarios (Table 2).

In the 2024 hunt season, 16 (1.6%) of all successful black bear hunters reported the use of a guide.

Hunter Days Afield (Percentage of Successful Hunters 2024 Season)

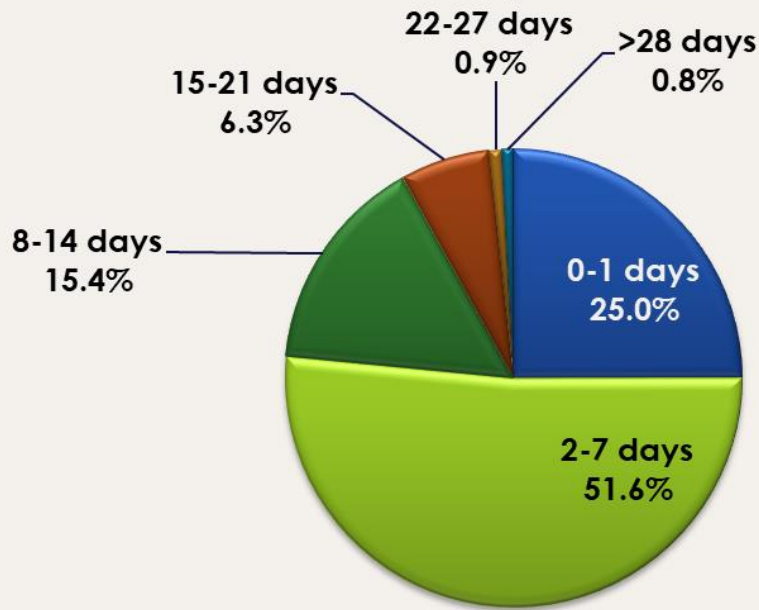


Figure 5: Time spent afield by successful black bear hunters during the 2024 hunt season.

Methods of Take

There are various methods by which hunters can legally harvest a black bear in California. Of those who responded, the use of rifles accounted for 78.7% of black bear harvest, followed by archery equipment (10.7%). Shotgun, pistol, muzzleloader, and crossbow take comprised 0.5% of the total harvest (Figure 6). The remaining 10.0% did not report any method of take while harvesting black bears.

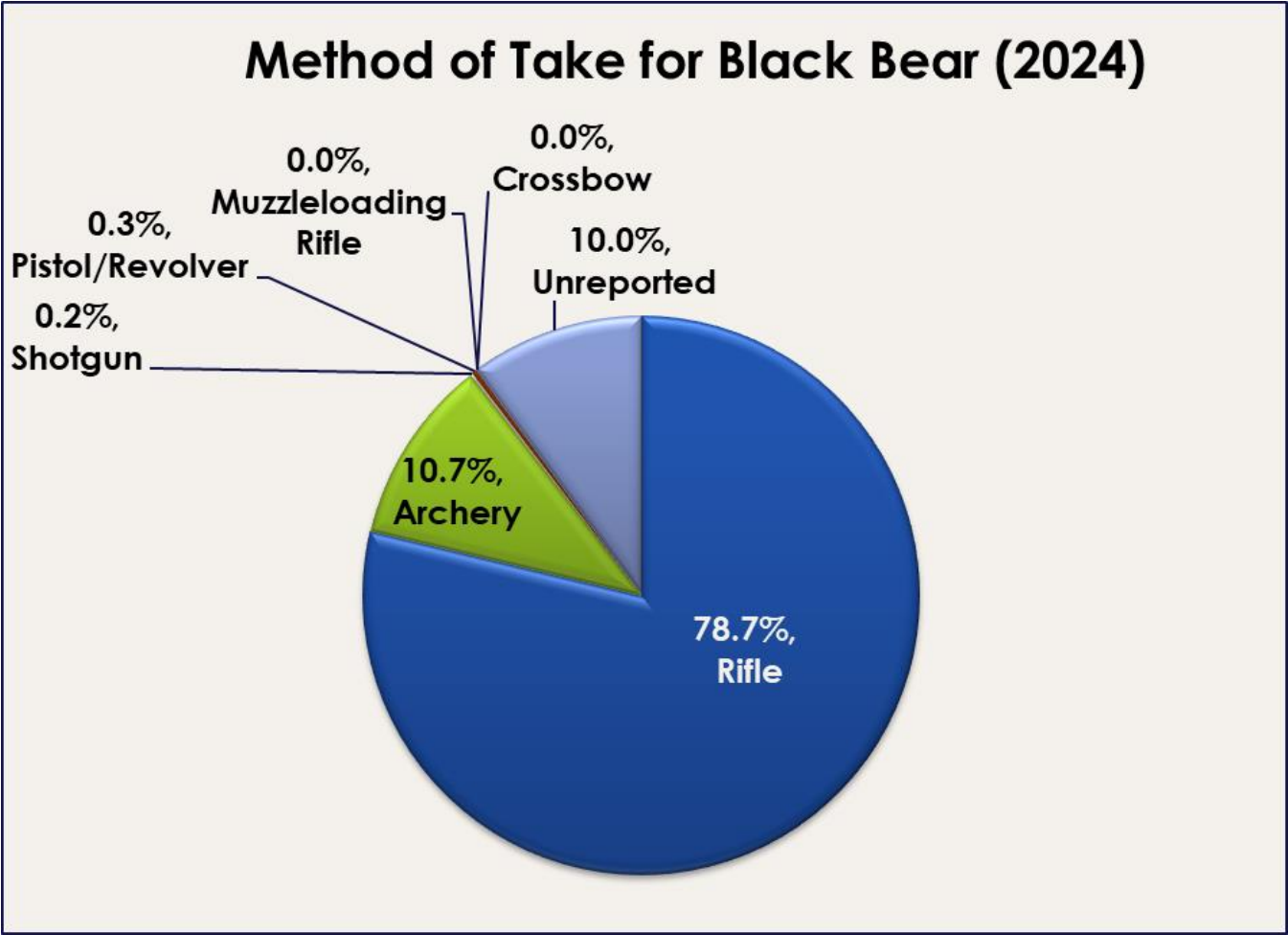


Figure 6: Method of black bear harvest summary for the 2024 black bear hunt season.

Table 2: 2024 black bear harvest summary based on method and season.

	General Hunting	Archery Hunting	Unknown	Grand Total
Black Bear Hunting	32.3%	4.4%	0.0%	36.7%
Took a Black Bear while Deer Hunting	46.8%	6.3%	0.0%	53.1%
Unknown	0.1%	0.0%	10.0%	10.1%
Grand Total	79.2%	10.7%	10.0%	100.0%

Timing of Take

Black bears were predominantly harvested in September and October (Figure 7), most likely due to the general black bear hunting season being concurrently open with general deer season in most of the deer hunt zones. Similar to previous years, the number of black bears harvested in November and December was less than the month of October, reflecting decreasing black bear availability due primarily to denning chronology.

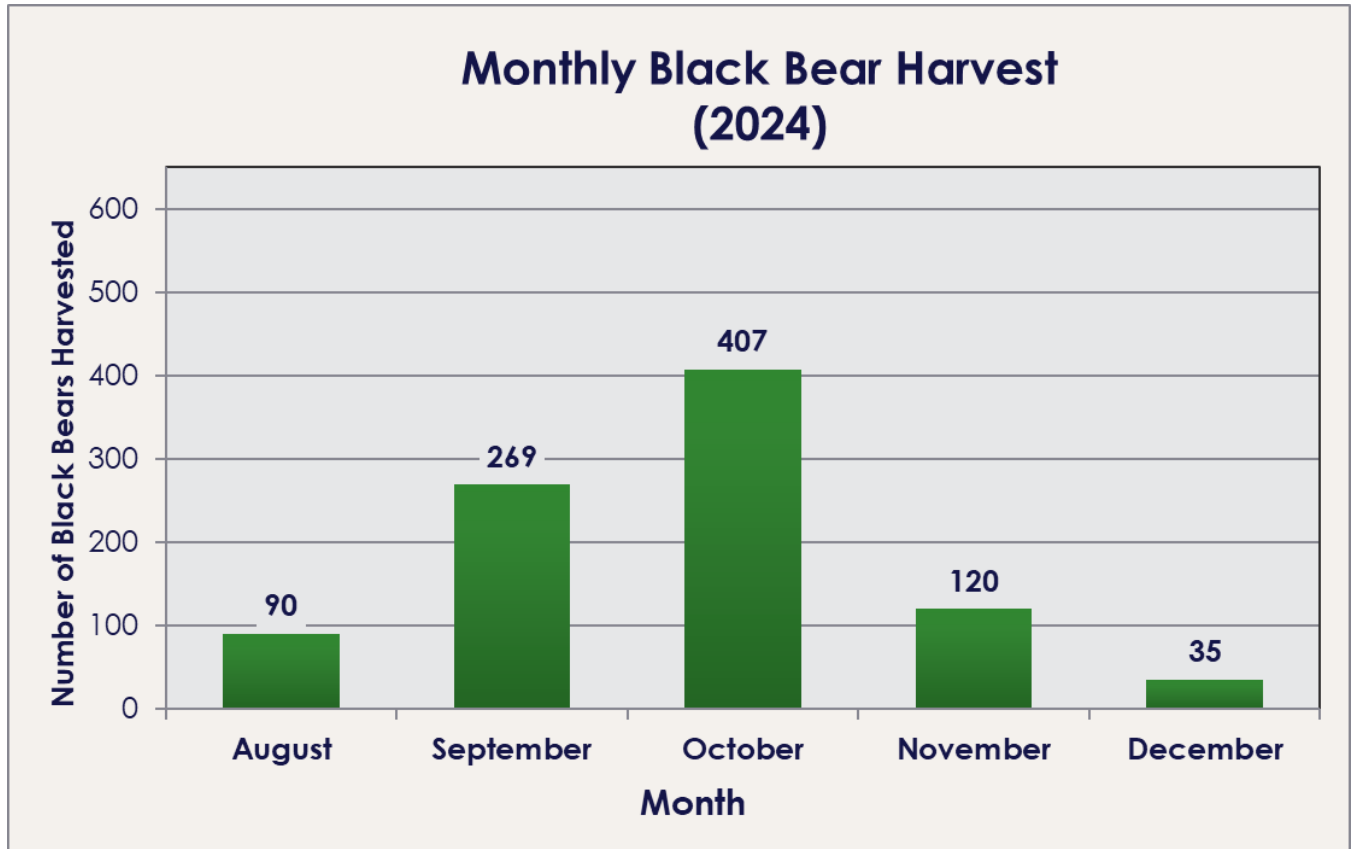


Figure 7: Monthly black bear harvest during the 2024 hunt season.

Location of Take

Northern California counties provide some of the better black bear hunting in the state. Black bears were known to be harvested in 34 of California's 58 counties (Table 2). The top five counties for reported take were: Trinity (10.0%), Shasta (8.7%), Mendocino (7.6%), Siskiyou (6.5%), and Humboldt (6.2%). These five counties combined account for about 39% of the total 2024 black bear harvest.

These counties provide some of the better black bear habitat in the state – areas of mixed aged conifers interspersed with open meadows and mixed

hardwood forests. They also provide ample amounts of black bear preferred forage of calorie-dense berries and nuts as well as access to supplemental insects, meats, and other consumable plant material.

In the Private Lands Management (PLM) Program for 2024, there were 11 licensees that turned in their general tags for PLM black bear tags and resulted in a harvest of 2 black bears.

Table 3: 2024 black bear harvest by county.

COUNTY	HARVEST	PERCENT OF HARVEST
ALPINE	19	1.94%
AMADOR	8	0.82%
BUTTE	23	2.35%
CALAVERAS	19	1.94%
DEL NORTE	17	1.74%
EL DORADO	42	4.29%
FRESNO	37	3.78%
GLENN	18	1.84%
HUMBOLDT	61	6.23%
INYO	2	0.20%
KERN	16	1.63%
LAKE	8	0.82%
LASSEN	16	1.63%
LOS ANGELES	10	1.02%
MADERA	27	2.76%
MARIPOSA	6	0.61%
MENDOCINO	74	7.56%
MONO	4	0.41%
NEVADA	19	1.94%
PLACER	22	2.25%
PLUMAS	37	3.78%
SAN BERNARDINO	20	2.04%
SANTA BARBARA	2	0.20%
SHASTA	85	8.68%
SIERRA	18	1.84%
SISKIYOU	64	6.54%
STANISLAUS	6	0.61%
TEHAMA	39	3.98%
TRINITY	98	10.01%
TULARE	41	4.19%
TUOLUMNE	30	3.06%

COUNTY	HARVEST	PERCENT OF HARVEST
UNKNOWN	77	7.87%
VENTURA	6	0.61%
YOLO	2	0.20%
YUBA	6	0.61%
TOTAL	979	100.00%

Black Bear Hunter Survey

A survey of black bear hunters was conducted in 2025 to understand hunter perspectives, preferences, and values related to black bear hunting in California. Approximately 1,500 respondents provided answers to the survey. Results are being prepared for future publication.

Regulations

The California State Legislature has delegated a variety of powers to the California Fish and Game Commission (Commission). These powers are delegated within California Statutes that comprise the FGC. The FGC establishes the basis of fish, wildlife, and native plant management and protection in California. The FGC more specifically establishes the Commission's authority in fish and wildlife rules, regulations, and policy making, whereas CDFW is designated as the trustee for fish and wildlife resources. CDFW is charged with implementing and enforcing regulations set forth by the Commission, as well as providing biological data and expertise to inform the Commission's decision-making process. Under administrative law, the California Code of Regulations (CCR) codifies general and permanent rules and regulations to be enacted by the agency responsible for implementation.

The Commission and CDFW work within CCR Title 14 - Natural Resources. Regulations routinely addressed under CCR Title 14 include general harvest regulations including harvest quota, season dates, and hunt zone boundaries. Management features can be adopted, amended, or repealed via the Administrative Procedures Act (APA) rulemaking process. CDFW provides recommendations for adopting, amending, or repealing regulations based on inventory and monitoring of resources, as well as both biological and social conditions. To change hunting regulations for any species, an additional parallel document is required through the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). CEQA requires all public agencies to evaluate the environmental impacts of

projects, including regulation changes which may have potential to significantly affect the environment. CDFW has prepared Environmental Documents for each harvested species, including black bear, on behalf of the Commission. This document serves as a guide for periodic harvest adjustment recommendations within the APA process.

Additional information regarding the Commission, FGC, CCR, and upcoming meetings related to black bear conservation and management in California can be found at the following website: <https://fgc.ca.gov/>.

Human-Black Bear Conflict

This report does not provide information regarding HBC in California. Information regarding HBC in California is available on CDFW's Human-Wildlife Conflicts Program webpage at: <https://wildlife.ca.gov/HWC/Black-Bears>.

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