



**State of California
Natural Resources Agency
Department of Fish and Wildlife**



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INTERIM BLACK BEAR TAKE REPORT 2021-2023

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Executive Summary

The 2021, 2022, and 2023 bear (*Ursus americanus*) hunting seasons combined resulted in a total of 3,915 black bears taken (mean: 1,305 per year). A total of 97,151 bear tags were issued. Overall hunter success was 4 percent. The bear hunting seasons ran their full lengths and closed on the last Sunday of December each year. The top five counties for reported take were: Shasta (9.5%), Trinity (7.8%), Mendocino (7.6%), Siskiyou (6.1%), and Humboldt (5.9%). In the Private Lands Management (PLM) Program for 2021-2023, there were 38 licensees that turned in their general tags for PLM bear tags and resulted with a program harvest of 7 bears.

Of the returned harvest report tags, 38.9 percent (1,524) indicated a female was taken. Of the successful bear hunters who reported effort, approximately 78 percent (3,035) indicated they spent 7 days or less in pursuit of bears. Lastly, bears killed with the assistance of guides only accounted for 1 percent of the total bears harvested.

In 2012, SB 1221 was passed that made the use of dogs unlawful for taking bear. The law took effect on January 1, 2013 and applies to bear hunting seasons from 2013 forward. The last bear lawfully taken with assistance of dogs in California was an 11-year-old male bear in Trinity County on December 18, 2012. The use of hounds is known to be an effective method in taking bear. Without the use of this method of take, the 2013 bear hunter take decreased as was anticipated.

In 2024, CDFW's Black Bear Program switched to using an integrated population model (IPM) to monitor California's black bear population. The IPM 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. For the age at harvest data, a premolar tooth was removed from most hunter-killed black bears for age determination, which is one factor used to estimate the total population size within Bear Conservation Regions (BCRs). According to this analysis, CDFW estimates an average population size of 59,851 (90% CI: 49,412 – 70,611) black bears in California for the years 2020-2024 inclusive.

Considering its new population monitoring approach and the development of the Black Bear Conservation and Management Plan for California (2025), CDFW's Black Bear Program developed this interim take report to present results from the 2021, 2022, and 2023 bear hunting seasons. Future take reports starting with the 2024 iteration will present data from individual years.

Introduction

As defined in the Black Bear Conservation and Management Plan for California (2025), the two goals of CDFW's Black Bear Program are (i) 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 (ii) 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 with the diverse economic and recreational needs of the people of California. This effort is in accordance with the state's policy regarding wildlife resources (Fish and Game Code Section 1801), which states the following goals:

- a.) To provide for the beneficial use and enjoyment of wildlife by all citizens of the state;
- b.) To perpetuate all species for their intrinsic and ecological values;
- c.) To provide aesthetic, educational, and non-appropriative uses;
- d.) To maintain diversified recreational uses of wildlife including sport hunting;
- e.) To provide for economic contributions to the citizens of the state through the recognition that wildlife is a renewable resource; and
- f.) To alleviate economic losses or public health and safety problems caused by wildlife.

For the state to meet these goals, the Legislature has delegated the power to regulate the take and possession of 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 bear population and hunter's bear-hunting patterns by collecting harvest attributes via a self-administered questionnaire. Since 1982, all bear tag holders have been required to return their bear harvest report tags to the Department whether they successfully took a black bear. Since 2013, successful bear hunters have been able to complete their tag questionnaire on-line through the Department's Automated License Data System (ALDS). The data obtained from these harvest tag reports comprise a substantial portion of this report.

Age data are obtained from premolar teeth extracted from hunter-killed bears. The age-at-harvest data provide direct insight to the age structure of black bears taken during the season.

Summary of 2021-2023 Bear Hunting Regulations

The 2021-2023 general 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 bear hunting is permissible, the general bear season opened on the second Saturday in October. Additionally, persons possessing a valid bear tag were able to hunt during a 23-day archery-only season from mid-August to early September. The 2021-2023 general bear seasons closed when the Department received report of 1,700 bears taken, or on the last Sunday in December, whichever occurred first.

There was no limit on bear tag sales. The bag and possession limit is one bear per hunter. Bear cubs (defined as bears less than one year of age or weighing less than 50 pounds), and females with cubs may not be taken. Pursuant to SB 1221, in 2013, the use of dogs to take bear was unlawful during both the bear archery season and the general bear season.

2021-2023 Hunt Season Results

Season Length

The 2021-2023 archery bear hunting seasons opened statewide on the third Saturday of August and ran for 21 consecutive days. The general bear hunting season opened concurrently with general deer hunting season in the A, B, C, D, X8, X9a, X9b, X10, and X12 deer hunting zones. In the remaining deer hunting X zones, bear season commenced the on the second Saturday of October. The bear season closed on the last Sunday in December pursuant to California Code of Regulations, Title 14, section 365.

Tag Sales

In all 97,151 bear hunting tags were sold for the 2021-2023 bear seasons. The total consisted of 96,594 resident bear tags (including Junior) and 557 non-resident bear tags. Average bear tag sales in 2021-2023 was 6.57 percent (1,996) higher than 2020 bear tag sales (30,388) and 12.90 percent more than the 2018-2020 average. Non-resident bear tag sales increased by an average of 34.54 percent (47.67) from 2020 sales (138) with average resident bear tag sales increasing by 6.44 percent (1,948) over 2020 sales. This reflects an average revenue increase of \$225,860 from 2020.

Total Take and Sex Composition

During the 2021-2023 black bear hunting seasons, an average of 1,305 bears were taken. The 2021-2023 average bear take was 27 percent (277) higher than the 2020 hunt year (Figure 1) and 4.2 percent (52) greater than the 2018-2020 average of 1,253 bears taken. Of the 3,915 total bears taken 2,253 (57.5%) were male, 1,524 (38.9%) were female, and 138 (3.5%) harvest report tags did not report sex (Figure 2).

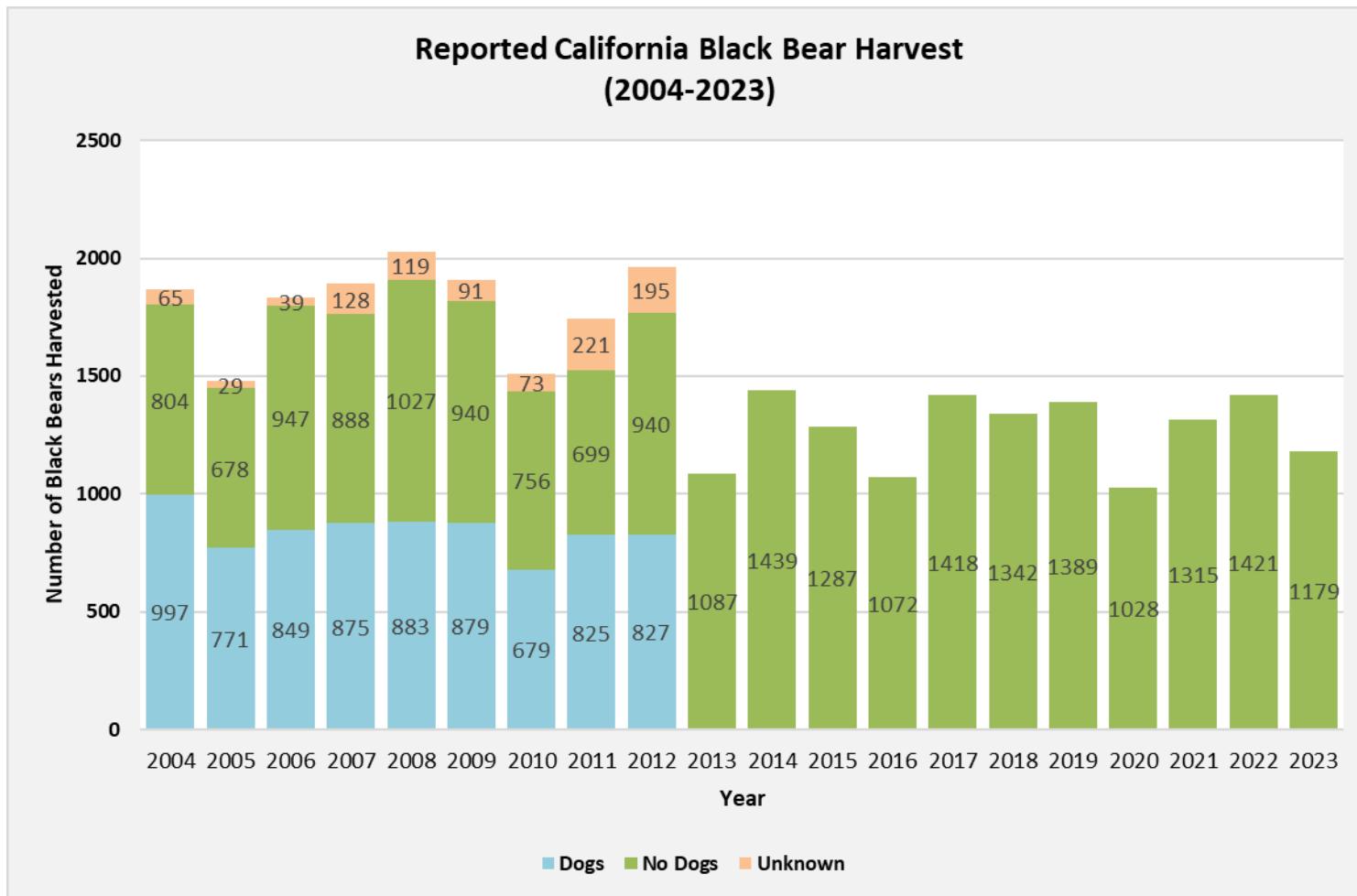


Figure 1. Annual Bear Take 2004-2023

Sex of Harvested Black Bears (2021-2023)

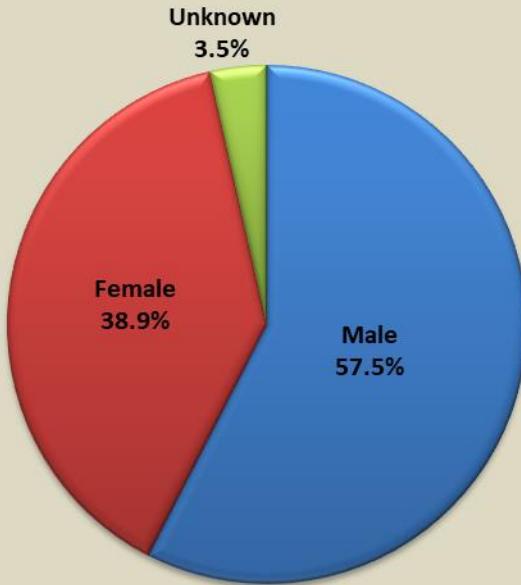


Figure 2. Bear Take Sex Composition 2021-2023

Hunter Effort

Similar to previous years, most bear hunters that were successful in harvesting a bear spent a week or less afield (Figure 3). Of the successful hunters who reported number of days hunting before take, 28.8 percent spent a day or less in the field while 52.8 percent spent 2 to 7 days in the field. The remaining 18.4 percent reported spending 8 or more days in the field. Successful hunters reporting effort spent an average of 4.8 days in the field before taking a bear.

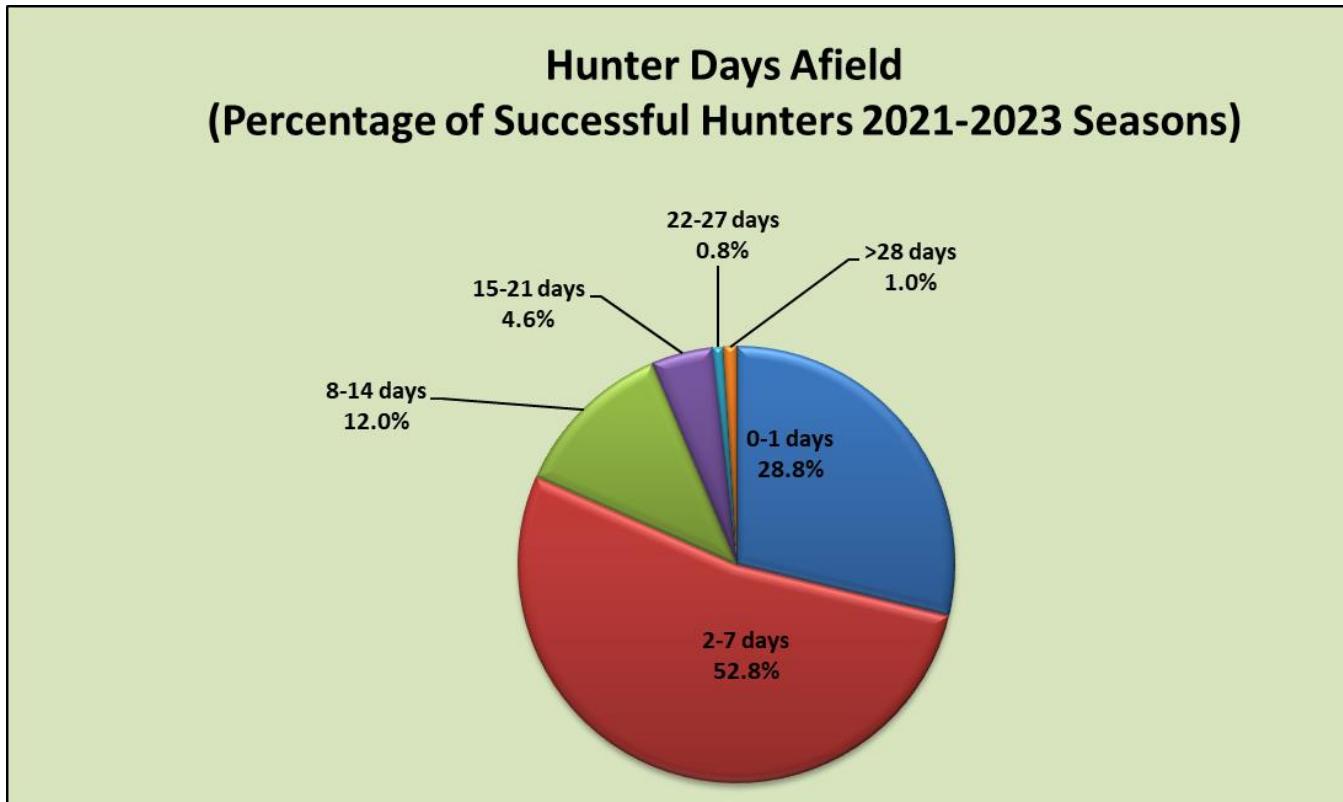


Figure 3. Hunter Effort 2021-2023

Methods of Take

There are various methods by which Californians can legally harvest a bear. Of those who responded, the use of rifles accounted for 84.0 percent of bear take, followed by archery equipment (10.6 percent). Shotgun, pistol, muzzleloader, and crossbow take comprised 1.5 percent of the total bear take (Figure 4). The remaining 4.0 percent did not report any method of take while harvesting bear. Individuals using a rifle spent an average 4.8 days in the field before taking a bear, whereas individuals using archery equipment spent an average 4.3 days and the single individual using a muzzleloader spent 6.0 days in the field.

In 2012, a new state law was passed that made the use of dogs unlawful for taking bear. This law took effect beginning January 1, 2013 and applied to the 2020 bear hunting season. Without the use of this hunting technique, the 2013 bear hunter take decreased to the second-lowest take season seen since the turn of the century. However, in the majority of hunt seasons preceding 2013, black bear take by hunters without dogs exceeded take by hunters with dogs (Figure 1).

Hunters were also asked to report whether a bear was taken while hunting exclusively for bear, or while deer hunting. Similar to previous years, the 2021-2023 seasons' hunters who took bear while concurrently hunting deer accounted for the majority (54.7%) of the total harvest scenarios (Table 1). Only 5.9 percent of hunters reported taking their bear using archery equipment while deer hunting. A total of 40.5 percent of hunters took their bear while exclusively bear hunting, and 4.6 percent of the total hunted exclusively for bear using archery equipment.

In the 2021-2023 hunt seasons, 46 (1.2%) of all successful bear hunters reported the use of a guide. Of all bear hunters reporting successful take in 2020, 11 (1.1%) reported the use of a guide, representing no significant change.

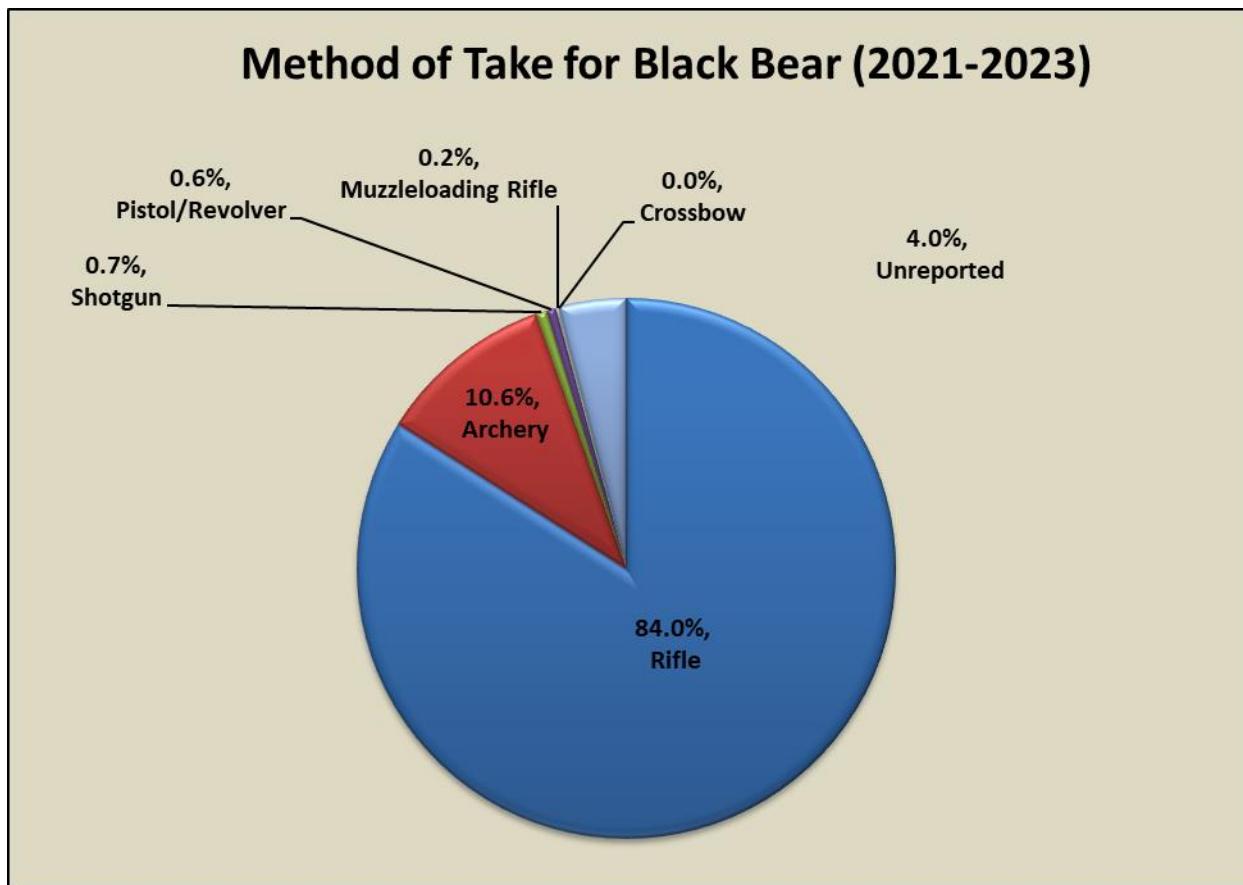


Figure 4. Method of Take Summary 2021-2023

Table 1. Take Summary by Method and Season (2021-2023)

	General Hunting	Archery Hunting	Unknown	Grand Total
Bear Hunting	35.9%	4.6%	0.0%	40.5%
Took a Bear while Deer Hunting	48.7%	5.9%	0.0%	54.7%
Unknown	0.9%	0.0%	4.0%	4.9%
Grand Total	85.5%	10.5%	4.0%	100.0%

Timing of Take

Bears were predominantly harvested in September and October (Figure 5), most likely due to the general bear hunting season being concurrently open with general deer season in most of the deer hunt zones. Similar to previous years, the number of bears harvested in November and December was less than the month of October, reflecting decreasing bear availability due primarily to denning chronology.



Figure 5. Monthly Bear Take 2021-2023

Location

Northern California counties provide some of the better bear hunting in the state. Bears were known to be harvested in 41 of California's 58 counties (Table 2). The top five counties for reported take were: Shasta (9.5%), Trinity (7.8%), Mendocino (7.6%), Siskiyou (6.1%), Humboldt (5.9%). These five counties combined account for about 38 percent of the total statewide 2021-2023 bear take. These counties provide some of the better bear habitat in the state – areas of mixed aged conifers interspersed with open meadows and mixed hardwood forests. These regions 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.

Table 2. Bear Take by County 2021-2023

County	Harvest	Percent of Total Harvest
ALPINE	51	1.30%
AMADOR	26	0.66%
BUTTE	101	2.58%
CALAVERAS	103	2.63%
COLUSA	8	0.20%
DEL NORTE	32	0.82%
EL DORADO	142	3.63%
FRESNO	192	4.90%
GLENN	51	1.30%
HUMBOLDT	230	5.87%
INYO	26	0.66%
KERN	162	4.14%
LAKE	51	1.30%
LASSEN	66	1.69%
LOS ANGELES	42	1.07%
MADERA	117	2.99%
MARIPOSA	56	1.43%
MENDOCINO	296	7.56%
MERCED	5	0.13%
MONO	57	1.46%
NAPA	11	0.28%
NEVADA	57	1.46%
PLACER	89	2.27%
PLUMAS	178	4.55%
RIVERSIDE	3	0.08%
SACRAMENTO	0	0.00%
SAN BERNARDINO	36	0.92%
SANTA BARBARA	21	0.54%
SHASTA	371	9.48%
SIERRA	53	1.35%
SISKIYOU	239	6.10%
SONOMA	3	0.08%
STANISLAUS	17	0.43%
TEHAMA	184	4.70%
TRINITY	304	7.77%
TULARE	197	5.03%
TUOLUMNE	127	3.24%
UNKNOWN	124	3.17%
VENTURA	26	0.66%
YOLO	4	0.10%
YUBA	57	1.46%
TOTAL	3,915	100.00%

Estimated Population Size

Estimated black bear population size using an integrated population model (IPM) 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. For age at harvest data, a premolar tooth is removed from nearly all harvested bears for age determination, which is one factor used to estimate the total population size within the Bear Conservation Regions (BCRs; Figure 6). Teeth are sent to an independent laboratory in Montana for age determination by counting cementum annuli.

Table 3: Average estimated black bear population sizes in nine Bear Conservation Regions (BCRs) across California between 2020-2024, based on the new statewide integrated population model (IPM). Estimates are provided for 2020-2024 per the Black Bear Conservation and Management Plan for California (2025).

Bear Conservation Region	Population Estimate (90% CI)
Hunt:	
North Coast	22,555 (16,845 – 28,196)
Cascades	13,147 (9,735 – 16,524)
Northern Sierra	10,076 (7,592 – 12,657)
Southern Sierra	7,860 (6,032 – 9,649)
Transverse Ranges	1,645 (1,142 – 2,143)
No-hunt:	
Northeastern California	2,225 (1,223 – 3,192)
Central Coast	1,631 (1,076 – 2,184)
South Coast	230 (122 – 337)
Inland Deserts	481 (291 – 666)
Statewide	59,851 (49,412 – 70,611)

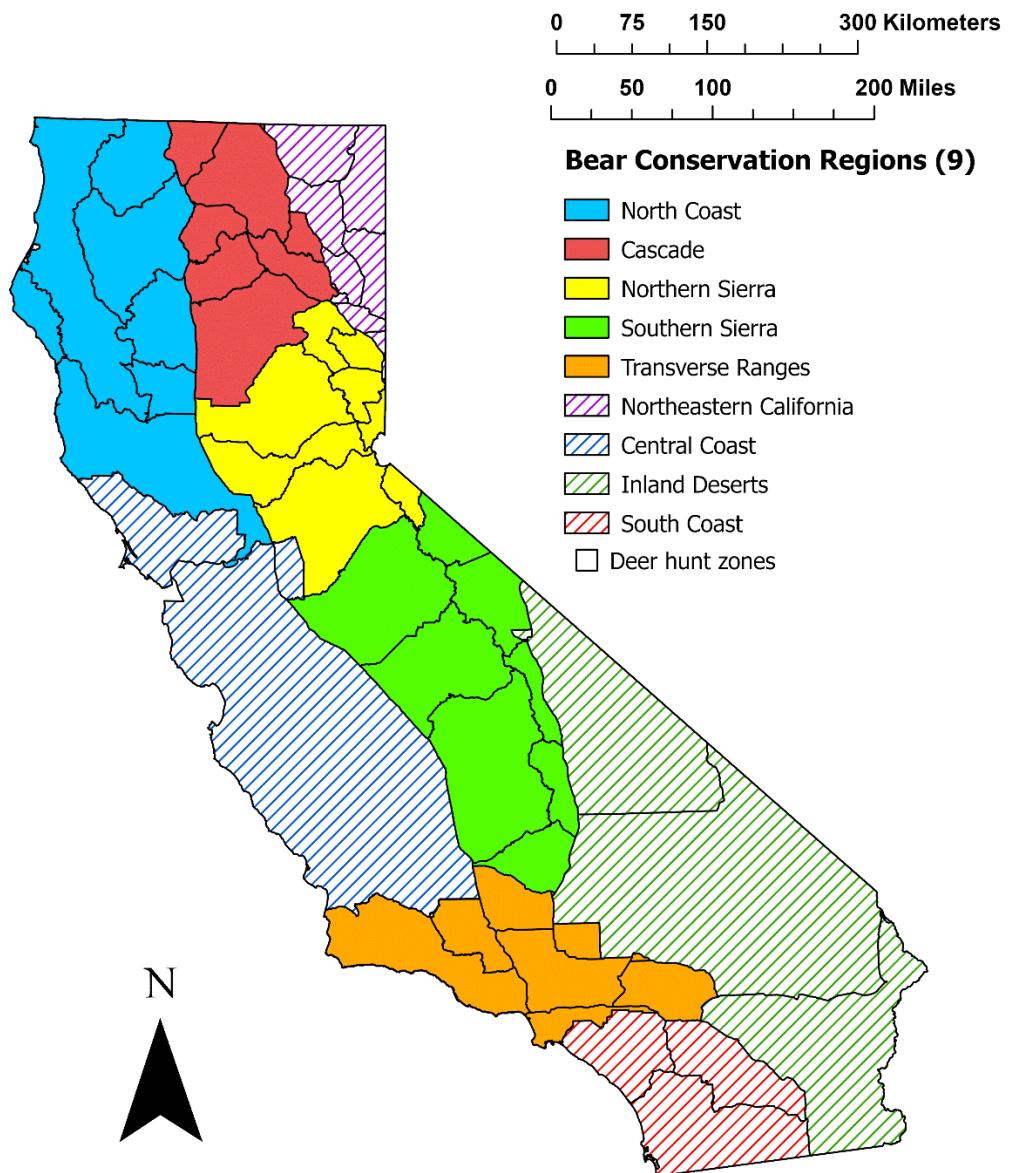


Figure 6. Bear Conservation Regions



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