



NATIVE AMERICAN FISH & WILDLIFE SOCIETY

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Tribal Highlight: Menominee Nation's 30 Years of Black Bear Management

A day in the life of the Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin's only wildlife biologist



NAFWS staff joined Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin Wildlife Biologist Don Reiter in February to learn about the Menominee black bear project. The Menominee Conservation Fish and Wildlife Department has researched black bears since 1998 with the goal of maintaining healthy bear populations and reducing human-bear conflicts.

The Menominee Reservation in northeastern Wisconsin is the largest Indian reservation east of the Mississippi River with 235,000 acres of largely forest land with 300 miles of trout streams and 80 named lakes. Born and raised on the Menominee Reservation and a citizen of the Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin (MITW), Don Reiter has been the Tribe's only wildlife biologist for 31 years.

Reiter's interest in fish and wildlife began at an early age, "My father would come home from work and ask me to dig up a can of worms and we would go fishing. Although we didn't have much time together, I appreciated the time we spent fishing and in the forest." As a student, Reiter was introduced to the fish and wildlife management through a summer jobs program with the Menominee Conservation Fish and Wildlife Department where he found mentors in Conservation Warden Al Fowler and Department Director Leon Fowler.

Soon after graduating with his Bachelor's in fishery management from the University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point, Reiter return for his Master's in Wildlife Management where he began working with the Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin on a beaver control project. In 1991, Reiter was hired as a Fish and Wildlife Manager for the Menominee Conservation Fish and Wildlife Department with the role of protecting the Tribe's Clan animals – the Bear, the Eagle, the Wolf, the Crane, and the Moose.



Don Reiter adjusts radio-transmitter collar on female black bear.

The Menominee Black Bear Project

The Menominee Conservation Fish and Wildlife Department was established in 1978 and is now a part of the Menominee Environmental Services Department. Today the department employs nine staff including Department Director Jeremy Pyatskowitz, two environmental program coordinators, a water resources specialist, three technicians that assist with invasive species and water resources projects, a fisheries biologist, and wildlife biologist Don Reiter.

Often in Tribal fish and wildlife management, small departments must take on a wide variety of responsibilities and the Menominee Tribe is no exception. The department's small staff have developed impressive skillsets and expertise. Reiter is currently working on several major projects including timber wolf reintroduction and monitoring, pine marten surveying, waterfowl management projects, chronic wasting disease testing, lake sturgeon monitoring, wild rice restoration, and black bear research.

One of these projects, the Menominee Black Bear Project, has been ongoing for decades. As a clan animal, the black bear holds an important position in Menominee history and culture. However, some consider black bears a nuisance species and when they become accustomed to humans they must be relocated and sometimes euthanized. In 1998, the department secured funding for the Menominee Black Bear Research Study from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Tribal Wildlife Grant Program with the goal of studying the ecology and population dynamics of this culturally important species. This initial funding was used to capture and radio collar 15-20 black bears throughout the Menominee Reservation and the project has continued ever since handling nearly 300 bears. Through understanding black bear populations, home ranges, and denning sites the Menominee Environmental Services Department aims to manage for healthy bear populations and to reduce bear-human conflicts.

Using radio-transmitter collars equipped with motion-sensor devices, Reiter tracks the black bears' locations and identifies periods of inactivity to determine home ranges, habitat preferences, feeding patterns, dispersal rates, and denning sites. With this data, Reiter can plan health assessments during periods when the bears will likely be hibernating, a period of reduced activity in which the bears use stores of fat for energy while food supplies are low. In northern Wisconsin, this period is typically from October to March. During hibernation, the bears also give birth to litters of 2-4 cubs that spend their first two years alongside their mothers.

Each winter, Reiter collects weight and body measurements, vital signs, blood samples used for genetic analysis, removes the first premolar tooth for age determination, and tag the bears for later identification. Additionally, he monitors the development of newborn cubs and yearlings (age 1-2 years).



NAFWS Executive Director Julie Thorstenson keeps newborn cub warm.

NAFWS Site Visit

For 24 years, Don Reiter has advocated for Tribes in the Great Lakes Region as a Regional Director for the Native American Fish & Wildlife Society (NAFWS). In mid-February, Executive Director Julie Thorstenson, Education Coordinator Ashley Carlisle, and Public Information Officer April Richards traveled to join Reiter for a few days working with him on the Menominee Black Bear Project.

In the weeks leading up to our trip, Reiter used GPS tracking to find the denning sites for four of the female bears he was monitoring. Three of the four dens we visited were in the woods of the Menominee Reservation where Reiter grew up playing as a child. **However, while female black bears have small home ranges (5-7 square miles) relative to males (up to 125 square miles), these ranges often extend beyond political boundaries. This has led to a collaboration with land managers in neighboring communities.**

Our team was comprised of Reiter, NAFWS Staff, local veterinarian Dr. John Tracey, and several volunteers and students. At each den, Reiter and Tracey begin with a visual assessment of the denning site. Simply listening from outside the den, the team could determine whether females had cubs. Next, Tracey administered a sedative to the female black bear, removed the newborn cubs, and used foot straps to manually pull the female black bear from the den taking care to keep both mothers and cubs warm. Researchers then performed health exams and collected measurements. While continually monitoring heartrate, respiration, and temperature, the researchers measured chest girth, total length, tail length, neck girth, head measurements, and front and back footpads. These measurements are

taken to monitor annual growth. Tracy also collected blood samples used for genetic analysis and to check for disease. Reiter performed the same measurements on yearlings and weighed, sexed, and checked newborns for identifying characteristics.



NAFWS Education Coordinator Ashley Carlisle with female black bear.

Study Findings, Funding Challenges, and Future Plans

In the years the Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin has studied black bears, they have determined home ranges, movement patterns, survival rates, parental success, and estimated the Reservation's black bear carrying capacity. They have also collected data on relocation attempts of nuisance bears.

In previous years during these field assessments, Reiter would adjust or replace radio-transmitter collars allowing additional space for the bear to grow. Early spring is an important time for Reiter to track black bears. When bears leave their dens early (mid to late March) they are more likely to rely on garbage from homes until their natural foods are available. In these years, Reiter receives 40-50 complaints of nuisance bears which require some sort of attention ranging from black bear education outreach to removal. However, this year we removed the collars without replacing them due to insufficient funding to continue the project.

Though staring down challenges, Reiter has big plans for the Menominee Black Bear Project. His plans include continuing to develop the Menominee's bear management plan, developing models for habitat use, expanding monitoring of male home ranges, and additional research. He feels confident that they will secure additional funding in the future.

Thank you to Don Reiter, his team, and the Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin for this incredible experience.

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NEWS RELEASE

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