



## What Do You Think of the New Jersey Bear Hunt?

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***Governor Murphy has declared that the bear hunt is over. Sparta's representatives in the New Jersey State Senate and Assembly disagree with his position. Where does the public stand on the issue?***

SUSSEX COUNTY, NJ - In 2014 Pedals the black bear became famous for sauntering upright through suburbs in northwest New Jersey. Occasionally seen dipping down to rest or ducking into nearby woods to avoid a barking dog, the bear had a missing front right claw and a disfigured front left leg.

It was his docile behavior and physical characteristics that caused as much concern for his safety as his celebrity. A [petition](#) with over 300,000 signatures called for Pedals to be moved to a sanctuary before the upcoming 2016 hunt.

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David Chanda, then director of the state Division of Fish and Wildlife, defended the decision not to relocate Pedals. "It wasn't necessary," Chanda [told](#) NJ.com at the time. "All the reports we received said that although the bear appeared in distress, he was never in distress."

### **Sighting of Pedals the black bear. June 2016. YouTube.**

In October of 2016, the bear that walked like a human was killed by one. On the heels of his death, gubernatorial candidate Phil Murphy [vowed to end an annual hunt](#) that began in 2010 and has resulted in the killing of over 4,300 bears to date.

Now governor, Murphy is looking to deliver. "The 2020 bear hunt will be the LAST," he tweeted in October 2020. The New Jersey Fish and Game Council, which manages the hunt, is his main opponent in Trenton. Each fighter has special interest groups in their corners. Less involved in the debate is the general public.

"Most New Jerseyans don't know what to make of bears or bear hunting," Peter Woolley said in the past and again during a recent phone interview. Woolley is the director of PublicMind, Farleigh Dickenson University's polling center. PublicMind has conducted multiple polls on the hunt. "This issue remains the purview of interest groups."

Two overriding questions that may be on the mind of the general public are whether the bear population can be sustained with a hunt and what risk do bears present to humans with or without the hunt.

Year	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
DEP Population Estimate	3,272	2,814	2,166	1,627	3,606	2,589	2,407	2,059	1,527	2,208	3,158
Killed In Hunt	592	469	287	251	272	510	636	409	225	315	410
Killed/Estimated Population	18%	17%	13%	15%	8%	20%	26%	20%	15%	14%	13%
Total Incidents	3,042	3,062	2,231	1,866	2,856	2,209	2,202	966	878	816	1,402
Incidents - Human Deaths	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-
Incidents - Human Attacks	1	-	-	-	1	1	1	-	-	2	1

**Data from New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP). Incidents range from a simple sighting to an attack.**

While the NJDEP provides estimates for the total bear population, nobody actually knows how many bears live in New Jersey, at least not with any certainty. A brief look at the statistics shows a significant amount of variability in the estimates from year to year with no clear cause for that variability. For example, the estimate more than doubled between 2013 and 2014.

"There could be 800, or there could be 10,000, we don't know," Angi Metler, founder of the Animal Protection League of New Jersey said in a phone interview. Metler has opposed hunts since 1988.

"Nobody has a number," John Rogalo said in a phone interview. "The only time you get a count is when they are close to being wiped out. You never, ever know the exact number."

Rogalo, a hunter since the age of 10, is the northern region vice president of the New Jersey State Federation of Sportsmen's Clubs, which plays a role in determining the membership of the Fish and Game Council. He also has a degree in wildlife management from Rutgers University.

Both sides of the hunt debate agree the bear population has rebounded significantly since facing extinction in 1970, when hunting was suspended for the next thirty-three years. This trend is seen nationwide, with experts [estimating](#) there are more black bears in North America today than in the 1600s.

The majority of the New Jersey bear population can be found north of Route 80 and west of Route 287, the northwest part of the state. This region may in fact have more bears per square mile than any state in the country, based on the population estimates made by the NJDEP.

**A related question is whether the number of bears allowed to be killed each year threatens the survival of the population.**

Wildlife experts have [estimated](#) that for black bears, a hunt that kills 14% of the population a year is sustainable. In New Jersey, that number has ranged from 8% to 26% over the past decade, with an average of 16% per year, according to NJDEP statistics. New Jersey also has a higher fertility rate for bears than other states, so the difference between 14% and 16% may not be significant.

Rogalo believes that the population is sustainable based on the numbers.

"We don't hunt things that are threatened or endangered," Rogalo said. "That's not what we do."

Opponents believe that the variability in the percentage of bears killed each year and estimate of the overall population is troublesome.

With respect to human-bear interactions, incidents can range from a simple sighting in the woods to a violent encounter.

Proponents of the hunt point out that increased incidents signals an increased population and greater danger for people.

Rogalo noted that the number of incidents rose from 815 to over 1,400 between 2019 and 2020, attributing the rise in 2020 to an increased bear population. Rogalo believes that the increase was due in part to Governor Murphy's 2018 mandate that prevented any hunt on state lands between 2018 and 2020. Among those 2020 incidents, there was a violent [encounter](#) where a man needed 36 stitches after being attacked in his garage.

Peer-reviewed [studies](#) suggest that following any moratorium on hunting, these incidents may in fact increase.

However, some animal experts believe that the 2020 increase has to do with people being at home more during the Covid-19 pandemic, not Murphy's actions.

"We had more sightings this year, but I write that up to everyone's home and didn't see bears in the lawn before," Bergen County Animal Control Officer, Carol Tyler said. A NJDEP representative [agrees](#) with Tyler.

According to NJDEP's March [numbers](#), the number of calls received reporting a bear incident dropped 50% in the first three months of 2021 compared to 2020.

Regardless of the cause of the 2020 spike in incidents, opponents of the bear hunt argue that these incidents are the result of human, not bear, behavior. And that incidents could be reduced greatly with simple, non-lethal practices such as limiting bear access to human food sources.

Opponents of the hunt also argue that the overall number of incidents is not relevant, but instead it is the number of violent incidents that matters most.

### **So how many violent encounters have New Jersey's residents had with bears to date?**

From a physical perspective, black bears are very dangerous. Healthy male bears can run 35 miles per hour, 25% faster than former world champion sprinter [Usain Bolt](#). In 2014, one of those bears chased and killed a Rutgers student who was hiking in northwest New Jersey.

While tragic, the 2014 student death is the only one caused by a bear in the state's history and it occurred after hunts took place in each of the prior four years.

More recently, while the state's bear population increased from under 100 in 1970 to over 3,000 by the end of 2002, during which time there were no hunts, nor were there any deadly encounters.

In terms of non-deadly attacks on humans in New Jersey, since 2010 there has been less than one per year according to the NJDEP, including the one in 2020.

New Jersey's experience with black bears is similar to that seen across the country. In the lower 48 states, [eight people have been killed by black bears since 2000](#), while there has been exponential growth in the overall population of bears.

Comparatively, [hunters kill 60 hunters per year](#) in the country.

Black bears generally co-exist peacefully with humans, according to Gary Alt, who directed the Pennsylvania Game Commission's black bear management program for over two decades.

"Black bears are the most glowing example of an animal that has adapted well to people," Alto [said](#) to Sports Illustrated in February of this year.

"They are funny," Lt. John Lamon of the Sparta Police Department said when asked during an interview if black bears were a concern. "They will lay out the garbage, like they are having a picnic," he said, noting that he does not consider bears as a significant threat to the town's residents.

Where would someone in Sparta most likely encounter a bear? "Behind Dunkin' Donuts," Lamon said.

But bears can be dangerous and a series of peer-reviewed studies show that during years immediately following a moratorium on hunting there were more human-bear interactions.

### **There are additional issues with the New Jersey hunt that may be of interest to the public.**

One is property damage. A bear can significantly damage crops, causing significant financial harm. This issue has in the past been addressed by giving farmers a special license to kill offending animals, so it is not clear that a broad hunt is needed to address the issue.

The killing of cubs, bears under one year of age, is allowed in the Garden State. As female bears typically give birth in January and the New Jersey hunt starts in October, cubs would usually be nine months old before the hunt.

This practice is perhaps the most controversial aspect of the New Jersey hunt.

Only one other state, Alaska, allows the killing of cubs.

According to NJDEP records, approximately 750 cubs have been killed since 2010 in New Jersey, some weighing as little as 30 pounds. Cubs represent approximately 17% of all bears killed during this period.

Eric Space lives in northwest New Jersey and has killed bears during his three decades of hunting. "Why-there is no reason," he said when asked if he would kill a cub during a hunt.

Animal-activist Metler said that cubs are specifically targeted by hunters from other states where the practice is not allowed, including Pennsylvania.

In a [study](#) conducted by the NJDEP, 43% of non-residents who participated in the 2016 New Jersey hunt said they would kill a bear of any size. 72% of New Jersey residents said they would not kill cubs, following Space's lead.



**Mother bear and cub. Source: Shutterstock.**

"Hunters come to New Jersey to kill cubs," Metler said during a phone interview. "I have seen them, dead in the back of pickups."

"For a foot stool or small rug for a child," Metler said when asked why she thinks some hunters target cubs.

Another [controversial](#) practice allowed in New Jersey is "baiting," whereby hunters habituate bears to visit a given location by leaving sugar-based food at the location leading up to the hunt.

Proponents for baiting argue that it allows hunters to judge the maturity of a bear and to allow hunters with poor mobility to participate.

Opponents of the hunt [do not believe](#) baiting follows traditional "fair" hunting practices, which call for a hunting structure that allows the animal an opportunity to escape.

"I tell people about the New Jersey bear hunt and they think I'm making it up," Brian Hackett, the New Jersey Director of The Humane Society said in a Zoom interview while discussing the killing of cubs and baiting, both allowed in New Jersey.

Historically, proponents of the hunt argued that the bear population was too large, putting the animals at risk of starvation. But even the NJDEP now [acknowledges](#) that the most significant driver of a high bear reproduction rate in the state is its relatively consistent natural food base.

One issue that perhaps best reflects the gap between supporters and opponents of the hunt is the \$2.00 fee one must pay for a permit to kill a bear. Both sides use the same fact to support their respective positions.

Proponents of the hunt in Trenton have argued to keep the permit fee low to show that the bears are not being killed for economic gain.

Opponents of the hunt maintain that the low fee reflects how little value hunters put on the life of a bear and that the hunt is not a revenue generator for the state. There were 11,000 permits issued during the 2020 hunt.

In the end, hunting advocates like Rogalo and Space argue that they have an inherent, basic right to hunt, often passed on through generations. Avid opponents of the hunt, such as Hackett and Metler and the organizations they represent, believe the killing of a single bear is unacceptable.

### **There is also a regional aspect to the debate over the hunt.**

Proponents believe that politicians like Governor Murphy, who live where there are few bears and little hunting, should not have the right to prevent those in "bear country," the northwest part of the state, from exercising that right. A right Murphy is trying to take away.

State Senator Steve Oroho and Assemblyman Parker Space, who represent much of the bear-rich northwest part of the Garden State, are both Republicans and Co-Chairmen of the NJ Angling, Hunting and Conservation Caucus. They disagree with Murphy's goal to end the hunt, both relying on a public safety argument.

"The Murphy Administration needs to put aside politics and personal feelings about hunting and look at the bigger picture," Senator Oroho [told](#) InsiderNJ. "This issue is and always will be a serious matter of public safety. There are a number of examples, including people being killed."

"This is a self-serving attempt to placate extremists while increasing the likelihood of a dangerous encounter with a bear," Assemblyman Space told the same media outlet. "Once again, Murphy is more concerned about politics."

State Senator Brian Stack, a strong opponent of the hunt alongside fellow Democrat Murphy, recognizes the argument coming from his colleagues in the northwest section of the state, and the people they represent. "I don't deal with bears in Hudson County and people could easily turn around and say, 'Well, it's easy for Stack to say because he doesn't have to deal with the bears in Hudson,' and they're right about that," Stack said. "But I still think that it's wrong."

While hunt supporters Oroho and Space are Republicans and Stack and Murphy are Democrats, the debate in Trenton is not completely polarized based on political party.

State Senate President Steve Sweeney is one of the strongest hunt supporters in the legislature.

"Dead on arrival," the Humane Society's Hackett said of any legislation proposed in Trenton that curtails hunting rights, because Sweeney will not let it through.

**Can the Fish and Game Council override Murphy's position and conduct a bear hunt in 2021?** While no member or representative of the council, or NJDEP which encompasses the council responded to requests for interviews, indications are that the council has not given up on a 2021 hunt.

"If they're doing their job, they must by law have a hunt," Rogalo, the Federation's vice president, said about the council during the interview. "I do know they're working on it."

January 2021 council meeting [minutes](#) confirm Rogalo's statement, stating that a new comprehensive black bear management policy or CBBMP has been accepted by vote of the council. A March [presentation](#) during a council meeting suggests an amendment to the old CBBMP that included a hunt by adding "efforts to better customize, expand and enhance educational messaging throughout New Jersey."

No records released to date by the NJDEP and council mentioned eliminating the hunt.

"I see absolutely zero possibility of not having a bear hunt," council member Phil Brodhecker [said](#) publicly in response to Governor Murphy's attempt to cancel the 2021 hunt.

The Fish and Game Council and the Governor have battled before, often winding up in court.

Metler, the animal rights activist, is not surprised that her adversaries refuse to duck quietly into New Jersey's dark woods despite Murphy's decree, as Pedals used to do when confronted by a barking dog.

"If I were them, I wouldn't give an inch," she said, as much about herself as her opponents.

***Note: Requests for interviews and input from the NJDEP, Governor Murphy, and the Fish and Game Council were unmet.***

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