

# WILDLIFE OF VICTORIA PARK

by John Serrao

## FLORIDA BLACK BEAR

On the last Thursday evening in July, my neighbor called me and told me excitedly to look out my back door. There, walking along the other side of our pond was a huge black bear. I ran for my camera and followed the bruin into a clearing, where it sat down at the edge of the woods, and I managed to take a series of photos of this beautiful, impressive animal at a safe distance.

I've seen black bears in several places in central Florida: Tiger Bay State Forest, Lake Woodruff National Wildlife Refuge, Rock Springs Creek State Park, and — especially — Ocala National Forest, where it's estimated that about 1000 bears live. I even photographed a mother bear with 2 cubs eating acorns in a tree in a front

yard of Victoria Commons 3 years ago. When I moved to Florida from Pennsylvania (where the black bear population is 4 or 5 times that of Florida), I never expected to see bears that often. But their numbers have been growing since being protected for 20 years after reaching a low point of about 300 in our state. Now there may be more than 4500 in Florida, and, as many of you surely know, last year the state initiated its first hunting season on bears for the first time in 2 decades. It was a very controversial decision, with many groups and individuals angrily and strenuously objecting. The state decided not to have a second hunt this year while their biologists study this highly contentious matter.

One of the reasons for initiating the hunt last year was the increase in bear-human encounters. It was thought that hunting and removing 300 bears from the Florida populations would help solve the problem. However, most of those bears that were taken lived in state and national

forests, not residential areas where these problems were occurring. A better solution, declared the objecting groups, would be educating people about how to behave around neighborhood bears and bear-proofing garbage receptacles, rather than killing such a majestic animal in its natural habitat.

If you see a black bear in Victoria Park, admire it from a safe distance. Black bears very rarely act threateningly toward humans, unless they come between a mother with cubs. NEVER feed a bear, and if a bear knocks over a garage can to get food, try waiting until morning to put it outside at the curb when bears are normally sleeping. We're fortunate to have the opportunity to see bears, bobcats, bald eagles, tortoises, cranes and other iconic Florida wildlife in Victoria Park.