

By Victor Skinner

MARQUETTE – Most hunters are reporting a favorable 2017 bear hunting season with a lot of larger bears and many sows with cubs, despite warm weather that made dog hunting difficult in the early on.

“I think the season went well, but we don’t have good preliminary data (yet) because we went to a new system this year,” Michigan Department of Natural Resources bear specialist Kevin Swanson said.

“We had several bears I heard of registered over 400 pounds,” he added. “There was lots of cubs, for sure, I heard that from just about everybody.”

Swanson said a changeover to a computerized reporting system delayed preliminary harvest data, which he plans on presenting at the Michigan Bear Forum in December.

He said a strong growing season made for good blueberry production, though a lack of other mast crops like acorns and black cherries likely resulted in more bears visiting bait sites this year.

“It was a good growing season for blueberries, but oak, there wasn’t too many acorns where I hunted for two years in a row now,” Swanson said.

“The harvest should be a little higher than last year, but that’s an educated guess more than anything,” he said. “Most hound hunters would agree the quota reductions we put in place in 2012 are increasing the population, with more cubs on the landscape. I think most hunters were satisfied.”

Folks who checked bears across the Upper Peninsula said hunters seemed to have done well this year.

“It was up this year, but a lot of other check stations (in the area) closed,” said Gloria, who checked 106 bears at Luckey’s Sport Shop in Iron County. “I usually do from 75 to 85.”

“The ratio of males to females was pretty even,” she said. “The biggest one I had come through so far was 433 pounds, dressed. I’ve had a couple 300 pounds plus, dressed.”

Gloria said several hunters in the area reported a lot of sows with cubs.

“I had two hunters who saw sows with five cubs. They were two different sows – one with white on her and another without,” she said. “There were lots of sows with three cubs or two cubs.”

The number of bears registered at McNeil’s Bar in Gould City was also up over last year, owner George Tremblay said.

“I think it was a pretty good season, better than last year,” he said.

Employees checked 45 bears with days left in the season this year, compared to 39 total in 2016.

“There were definitely bigger bears,” Tremblay said. “The biggest was a 600-pound bear. We had a couple of 400-pounders.”

Tremblay added that some hunters reported problems with wolves defecating on bait piles, and many mentioned coming across cubs.

“There’s a lot of sows with cubs,” he said. “There was a lot of big sows.”

At Kurt’s Korner in Pelkie, Patty Paavola also checked more bears and larger bears than last year.

“My biggest was 446 pounds. I had a few in the 300- to 350-pound range, ... a lot of bigger bear than I normally see,” she said. “I didn’t see a lot of little bears, at all.”

Wet weather during part of the season hindered hound hunters, Paavola said, though she checked at least 43 bears this year, compared to about 34 in 2016.

“The weather sucked. It was just so wet the dogs couldn’t pick up scent,” she said. “I got a lot of bait hunters the first week, then it slowed down for a few weeks when the hound hunters usually come in, then it picked back up later in the season.”

Several hunters also reported sows with cubs, some with triplets. In general, it seemed like a productive season with many larger bears, Paavola said.

“I couldn’t believe the bear I seen,” she said.

U.P. Bear Houndsmen President Joe Hudson said the Carney and Gwinn bear management units were slow going this year.

“There were pockets of bears. We had one big boar on all our baits,” he said. “Other than that, we targeted bear coming into the area to den.”

“The baits just weren’t getting hit,” Hudson said.

Others in the area reported a similar situation, he said.

“I checked around to a couple of check stations and bear numbers are down,” Hudson said. “In our whole area, I talked to people from Stevenson to Ralph, and the baits shut right down.”

Regardless, Hudson said his crew took bears this year, but “we covered a lot more area than we ever did before.”

“We got so much rain here and our bears hit the heavy swamps,” he said. “They for sure dened really early this year.”

On a positive note, Hudson said he did come across sows with cubs during the 2017 season, the first time in six years.

MBHA Director Sandy May said she spent a week hunting with her son Jamie Winkelman in the Newberry Bear Management Unit near Grand Marais, where Winkelman took a boar after several long tiring days searching for bears.

“For a lot of the season it was just us,” May said, adding that her cousin Jeff Halpin of Lewiston joined them after a couple of days. “There was not a ton of bears up there at all. We worked our butts off finding a track.”

May said it was the second successful hunt with her son after she took a bear with him about five years ago.

The Lower Peninsula also produced mixed results.

At Adrian’s Sport Shop in Presque Isle County, owner John Corzine said registration numbers were “roughly the same” as last year, with many hunters hauling in smaller bears.

"A few people saw a sow with cubs, not many," he said. "A couple had pictures of sows with cubs on their cameras."

Corzine said the biggest bear checked at the shop weighed about 380 to 400 pounds.

MBHA President Tim Dusterwinkle and Director Ernie Evans hunted the southern half of the Baldwin BMU, where they found several bears and took two, one for DNR Biologist Pete Kailing and another with a hunter from Reed City.

"It was a good season, we didn't have any trouble finding bears," Dusterwinkle said. "But I would say it was not good hunting weather."

"It was really hot and dry in September. I didn't notice any acorns and the berries were all dried up," he said. "The baits were getting hit pretty good."

Dusterwinkle said his baits showed reproduction is going well in the Baldwin unit, though he's somewhat concerned about the DNR's move to increase licenses in the unit from 80 last year to 155 for 2017.

"One of my baits had a sow and four cubs and another two baits had a sow and three cubs and they weren't the same ones," he said. "I'm encouraged by it."

"I still think the DNR over-reacted a bit by almost doubling the tags in the Baldwin unit, but I'm still encouraged by the number of bears. I think things are still moving in the right direction."

MBHA member Darren Kamphouse, of McBain, said it was a similar deal in the northern Baldwin unit.

"We treed nine that week and killed three," Kamphouse said. "I think the weather was so warm the bears were sitting on a food source and not moving much."

"The beechnuts were really good. Two bear we killed were full of corn, so they'd been in the corn fields," he said.

Kamphouse said he knows of three or four big bear that were taken in the Baldwin unit in 2017, as well as one his crew took west of Cadillac that weighed in at 390 pounds, dressed.

Kamphouse also noticed a lot of reproduction.

"We had 20 cubs on baits this year, that's the most I'd ever seen," he said. "We were feeding at least seven different sows with cubs."

"I think the bear population is pretty steady, but we'll see in the next few years."

Cadillac resident Kris Marcusse also hunted the Baldwin unit, where he helped to take a bruiser that weighed in at 464 pounds, dressed.

"It was 80 to 85 degrees almost every day, so that really put a damper on putting the dogs to work," he said. "Instead of being able to spend all day hunting, you were done by 10 or 11 because it was so hard on the dogs."

Despite the heat, there were plenty of bears, and a lot of young bears, he said.

“More than I’ve ever seen, even before we could start baiting,” Marcusse said. “It was common to see two, three, sometimes four cubs with a sow.”