On a beautiful day in southwest Florida a group of nature-lovers gathers around a bear trap and a stuffed bear cub to learn about black bear ecology and management. Kathleen Smith, Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission biologist, enlists someone in the group to enter the trap to demonstrate how it works and then explains how it is used to trap “nuisance bears”. The trap is a round metal culvert tube with bait (often donuts) tied inside one end and a trap door on the other. When the bait is pulled, the door slams shut. After the demonstration, she leads the group on a stroll through the CREW Marsh Trails off Corkscrew Road looking for bear sign and explaining the natural history of Florida black bears. As the walk ends the group is ready to explore more on their own in hopes of catching a glimpse of a rare Florida black bear.

Anytime is a great time to walk the CREW trails and look for signs of bears, but fall is particularly good. As the saw palmetto berries ripen in the pine flatwoods Florida black bears hunt for this nutritious treat and leave tracks and scat behind.  Fall foraging is important since food sources are more scare for them in winter – even in Florida. But fall isn’t the only good time for bears. Evidence of bears can be found any time of year if you know where to go and what to look for.

Bear tracks have five toes, large footpads, and obvious claw marks – making them look much like a human footprint. Black bears are omnivores but 80 percent of their diet is plants. So, look for cabbage palm trees that have flattened tops where black bears have torn into the heart of the palm to eat the “cabbage”. Check the trail for rotting logs that have been rolled over and torn open as bears look for insects to eat. Bears also mark trees with claws and teeth about 5 – 7 feet above the ground. The reason for this is unknown but may be to mark territory, establish dominance, or communicate breeding status.

If you’re lucky – and quiet – you may get a glimpse of a bear along one of CREW’s trails. Black bears are quiet and lumbering – but can run up to 30 miles per hour, and make only a few vocal sounds. Their long, sharp claws make them good tree-climbers, which they will do when afraid. A bear will stand on its hind legs not as a threat, but to get a better look at what’s going on nearby.  Black bears typically fear humans, so if you see one just stand tall, back away slowly, wave your arms and make some noise. Then consider yourself lucky to have been in the company of such a magnificent creature.

We have remote sensing wildlife cameras in places out at CREW. The pictures tell us who walks the trails when we aren't there. This is good data and often leads to some great surprises. This photo is one of a bear that strolled the trail just a day after I took my interns along the same path. You never know what you'll see along the trails at CREW.

To learn more about the CREW Trails, go to [http://www.crewtrust.org](http://www.crewtrust.org/) . To learn more about Florida’s black bears visit <http://myfwc.com/conservation/you-conserve/wildlife/black-bears/>.

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