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Black bear hunt kicks off today in Dismal Swamp refuge

By HATTIE BROWN GARROW, The Virginian-Pilot

© November 30, 2007

Last updated: 12:30 PM



A black bear walks down a road at the Dismal Swamp in Suffolk in 1998. D. Kevin Elliott | The Virginian-Pilot

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The Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge kicked off its second two-day black bear hunt today, to the dismay of animal rights advocates.

As of 11:15 a.m., no bears had been shot, said refuge manager Chris Lowie.

No special measures were taken this time around to ensure that at least one bear would be caught, Lowie said. Not a single bear was bagged last year.

The hunt is taking place on roughly 21,000 of the refuge's 111,203 acres.

Fifty hunters, each allowed to bring one guest hunter, were eligible to purchase the \$50 permits. A computer lottery in October selected which applicants could participate in the hunt.

All those who participate, including the guests, were required to pay for a permit.

Last year's lottery picked 100 hunters, but they weren't allowed to bring a friend. The refuge decided to make a change after hearing from those chosen.

"We found out that some people got selected, but their buddies didn't," Lowie said. "They didn't want to go it alone."

The refuge's bear population is estimated to be between 300 and 350, and should not be adversely affected by the hunt, Lowie said. Officials are allowing no more than 20 bears to be killed over the two days.

"We're just taking all the precautions we can to not hurt the bear population," Lowie said.

Two animal rights organizations sent an eight-page letter to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service condemning the hunt. They also requested that a new environmental impact review be done before a decision is made to hold the event again next year.

"We don't believe there's any justification for this hunt," said D.J. Schubert, a wildlife biologist for the Alexandria-based Animal Welfare Institute.

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