

BE BEAR AWARE CAMPAIGN

Do Bears Really Hibernate?



Most people think hibernation only means a deep sleep that the animal cannot be disturbed from. Not so for bears. We still need to be bear aware during the winter months when recreating and living in bear country.

Bears go into a low-level of torpor during their hibernation. Because their heart rate and body temperature only decrease slightly, bears can awaken, move, and respond to disturbances rapidly even in the middle of winter.



Not all bears will hibernate. Brown/grizzly and black bear males and females without cubs may get up and wander during the winter months in search of food. Bears that are starving or are physically injured or sick may not enter a den at all and will instead stay out in the winter seeking food until they die. It is females with cubs, or pregnant females that remain in their den. Polar bear males and females without cubs stay walking in search of food. This is commonly called a walking hibernation. Pregnant polar bear females or one with cubs will hibernate, usually on land.



Regional differences can also affect how long a bear hibernates and remains in their den. The length of time is dependent on weather and availability of food. In warmer climates hibernation can be as little as three weeks, or as much as eight months in cold climates. Polar bears average four to five months.

Preparation for hibernation is extremely important. In August, bears will enter a stage called hyperphagia where they must consume large amounts of food to increase their body fat. It is their body fat that sustains them while hibernating or denning.

There are no absolutes in bear behavior, denning, or hibernation. All bears are individualistic and their behavior and activities will vary, even amongst the same species.



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How to Avoid Encounters

Proper Food Storage

Bear Identification

What to do in an Encounter

How to Deploy Bear Spray

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Bear Dens

Bear dens vary in design based on geographic region, altitude, location, and species of bear.

Brown/grizzly bears in mountainous areas dig their dens at high altitude usually above 6,000 feet. Where brown/grizzly bears have returned to the prairies, they will dig their dens on hillsides or in river canyons. It is common for them to choose a site that is hidden by dense vegetation. The dens usually have a small doorway then a small tunnel to its sleeping chamber. Brown/grizzly bears usually gather bedding material like beargrass leaves and brush into the den to form a bed to sleep on. The entrance to the den is positioned so that snow drifts will cover the entrance providing insulation from wind and cold.

Black bears usually den at lower elevations than brown/grizzly bears. They may dig a den or den under roots of a tree, or under logs or boulders. Black bears have also been known to den in tree cavities often 50 or more feet above the ground, or even to den in the hollow open top of a cottonwood where they will get covered with snow in the winter.

Male **polar bears**, and some female polar bears without cubs, never den. Instead, they have a walking form of hibernation where activity is limited to conserve energy loss. During this time, they may periodically curl up under snow on the sea ice or under nearby brush piles on land. Pregnant female polar bears and those with cubs often go ashore to prepare their maternal den. There they dig their dens in snow drifts along river banks or on hillsides being sure to face the entrance downwind for added protection from the cold and wind.

