

A close-up photograph of a brown bear's face, showing its thick, shaggy fur in shades of brown and tan. The bear's eye is visible, and its large, dark nose is prominent in the lower right corner. The background is a soft, out-of-focus continuation of the bear's fur.

# Bears

of North America

**BLACK BEARS, BROWN BEARS,  
AND POLAR BEARS**

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Black Bear





# An eminent history

Among native hunting and fishing tribes in North America, there is a long history of respect and reverence for bears. Most large and powerful animals, such as bears, mountain lions, and eagles, influenced Indigenous peoples both personally and spiritually. The Black Bear, for example, was considered a friend of the Cherokee and served as a guide to the spirit world. Bears also provided an important source of items for the tribe. After a bear was killed, the Cherokee would collect the claws and teeth and wear them to impart the bear's power into their own bodies. Similarly, bear fur was worn not only for warmth, but also for protection and as a sign of authority or achievement.

Across Europe, the same history of esteem for bears has been recorded in every civilization. Regarded as the spirits of the forefathers or even as reincarnations of family members, bears remain a strong spiritual guide in some cultures. Today the bear is the state animal for Montana, California, and New Mexico, and it's the national animal for Russia, Finland, Greenland, and Taiwan, China.



# Sizes north to south

The largest of the bears, the Polar Bear, lives in some of the coldest parts of the world. Polar Bears are big partly because of their need to keep warm in ice-cold weather. The greater the body mass, the easier it is to retain heat and stay warm; the smaller the body mass, the easier it is to lose heat and stay cool. Thus, the farther north the latitude and the colder the climate, the larger the body mass will be. This association of size and latitude holds true for many animal and bird species, not just bears.

Brown Bears vary in size in their long range from Alaska to Wyoming. The most northern bears in Alaska and Canada tend to be the largest. However, Coastal Brown Bears along the coast and on coastal islands average about 800 pounds, while Brown Bears living far inland in the Yukon average around 350 pounds. Even though both are northern animals with larger bodies, diet plays a big role in their physical development. Bears that have access to a rich, abundant food source, such as salmon, attain a larger body mass due to the increased caloric intake. Inland bears living away from a steady supply of fish eat a lot of sedges and other greens as their main diet and are much smaller.

The relationship of size and latitude also applies to Black Bears. Black Bears in northern latitudes, such as northern Canada, are larger than those in Florida, not only because of the climate difference, but also because of the length of hibernation. Since northern bears must start hibernating earlier and stay in hibernation for a longer time, they need more fat reserves to make it through the winter. Their larger bodies make it easier to gain weight and retain the extra fat that is critical for their survival.





Black Bear



A close-up photograph of a bear's head and shoulder, showing its thick brown fur and a small ear. The bear is in a natural setting with green grass and moss in the foreground and a blurred forest background.

# Not just smart— resourceful

Unlike other creatures with simple, predictable behaviors, bears are amazingly smart and complex. Bears have a high brain-to-body-mass ratio, and they're some of the most intelligent animals in all of North America. Bears possess the ability to solve problems, plan, show insight, and communicate. They are known to share resources and benefit from mutual security. They have hierarchies and interconnected relationships with other bears. Each bear is a unique individual with an identifiable personality. A bear remembers things it has learned over the years and puts the recollections to use in various situations throughout its life.





Coastal Brown Bear



A vertical strip on the left side of the page shows a close-up of a bear's fur, which is thick and golden-brown with some lighter, almost white, patches. The texture is very detailed, showing individual hairs and the way they are packed together.

## Ready to mate

All bear species are polygamous. Males mate with many females during breeding season, and females mate with multiple males. When a male approaches a female in estrus, he may advance slowly at first and make different sounds, such as soft barking and clucking, while bobbing his head. However, I have seen males running at full speed once they get the scent of a receptive female.

When a male draws closer to an interested female, he may bite the fur around her neck. He will also try to rest his head across her back or shoulders. These are very tender moments. This interaction continues for a few minutes to several hours, or even up to many days—it all depends on the female's approachability. A male will wait for the female to become receptive, following her around for up to 10 days.

Eventually, the male perceives a signal from the female that it is time to breed. Often she will maneuver herself into position in front of the male. Mating is a brief affair, with copulation lasting 10–60 minutes. During this time, some bears are loud and animated. Others are quiet and demure. After successful mating, the male will often stay nearby for up to an hour, presumably to ensure that no other males pay the female a visit while fertilization occurs.

# Litter size

Litter size depends on the species and the overall health of the mother. Black Bears and Brown Bears, including Grizzly Bears, produce a range of one to five young, with an average litter of two cubs. In the eastern United States, a Black Bear litter of three cubs is not uncommon, while litters of four are rare and five are exceptional. Brown Bears along the coast have access to more fish and tend to produce more cubs than inland bears, which have less consistent food sources. Polar Bears have a range of one to three cubs in a litter. Although it's not uncommon for these bears to have a lone cub, only about 10% of Polar Bear litters have three cubs.







# A difficult beginning

A challenging part of a cub's life is the first dozen or so months. The mortality rate is lower for the first few months of life and gradually increases until cubs reach 1 year of age. While Black Bear cubs are in the den, their mortality rate is about 25%. Brown Bear cubs are in the 30-40% range, while Polar Bear cub mortality is 20-30%. Compared with the 70% mortality of Gray Wolf pups, you can see that bears do fairly well.

When young cubs are still in the den with their mothers, life is relatively safe but difficult. Cubs are born with only a thin covering of fur, and keeping warm is problematic if they aren't snuggling against their mother. Another concern is the exclusive food—mother's milk. If the milk dries up, it becomes a life-threatening situation for the nursing cubs.







## Bears . . . Icons of Our Wild Places

They are both beloved and feared. They are powerful and intimidating, yet they signify calmness, comfort, and peace. Bears are adored around the world, and they capture our fascination. Experience their magnificence with every turn of the page in *Bears of North America*. Award-winning author, naturalist, and wildlife photographer Stan Tekiela presents the lives of Black, Brown, and Polar Bears in stunning photographs and insightful descriptions. The result is a book deserving of a place on any coffee table or shelf.

Give it a try. Open this book to any page, and prepare to be struck with wonder.



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