



Natural History Notes



Brown Bears (*Ursus arctos*)

This mobile shows a common scene found along the shores of British Columbia, southern Alaska, and the Kamchatka Peninsula in the Russian Far East where brown bears congregate to feed on millions of salmon returning from the ocean to spawn in rivers and streams. North American bald eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*), as shown in the mobile, and their Russian counterparts, the white-tailed eagle (*H. albicilla*) and Stellar's sea-eagle (*H. pelagicus*), also feed heavily on the spawning fish. These natural events can no longer be seen along the coasts of Washington, Oregon, and California because brown bears no longer inhabit these heavily developed and densely populated regions.

Currently, these bears are found in Alaska, Canada, Europe, Asia, and in much smaller numbers in a few western states (e.g. Montana and Wyoming). Members of the species found in coastal areas where salmon are the primary food source are commonly called "brown bears." Brown bears living in inland habitats and in more northern environments are usually called "grizzlies." Brown bears resemble their close relative the black bear (*U. americanus*), but they're larger, and have more prominent shoulder humps, less prominent ears, and longer, heavier, straighter claws designed for digging. Colors typically range from dark browns through light blonds.

Weights vary depending upon time of year. Bears weigh less in spring and early summer, and more in late summer and fall. They gain weight rapidly during late summer and fall, and put on thick layers of fat by the time they're ready to enter their winter dens. Just before denning, most mature males (boars) tip the scales at about 500-900 pounds (180-410 kg), but some extremely large individuals reach fall weights of as much as 1,400 pounds (640 kg). Females (sows) usually weigh only about half to three-quarters as much. Extremely large coastal brown bears, when standing upright on their hind feet, are about 9 feet (2.7 m) tall. Bears found in inland and more northern habitats are smaller, probably because of the lack of fat, protein-rich salmon, and the fact that they spend much longer periods of time in their winter dens.

Boars and sows typically live to be about 22 and 26 years old, respectively, but some individuals live to be more than 30 years old. These bears have an especially good sense of smell, and under the right conditions, may be able to detect prey more than a mile away. In contrast, their hearing and eyesight are probably equivalent to that of humans. When they stand upright, some people think they're beginning to charge, but they're only testing the wind and trying to get a better view of their surroundings.

Brown bears mate during May–July, and they generally don't form strong bonds. Mating individuals rarely remain together for more than a week. The young, weighing less than a pound at birth, are born hairless in winter dens during January-February. Litters range from one to four cubs, but two cubs are most common. Young brown bears usually leave their mothers as 2-year olds in May or June, but some individuals stay with their sows for another 1-3 years.

Like humans, brown bears are omnivores and consume a wide variety of foods. Diets often include a variety of plant roots, berries, grasses, sedges, horsetail, cow parsnip, fish, ground squirrels, marmots, moose, and caribou. They'll also eat many types of carrion and are attracted to garbage dumps where they forage on human refuse—something that people should always try to prevent.

Brown bears are solitary animals that usually avoid the company of other bears, except during breeding and when they have cubs. However, these magnificent mammals congregate by the dozens along certain rivers and streams where they can easily catch salmon returning to spawn. Well-known locations for viewing feeding bears include Pack Creek on Admiralty Island in southeastern Alaska, the Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge on Kodiak Island, McNeil River State Game Sanctuary in lower Cook Inlet, and Brooks Falls in Katmai National Park and Preserve.

In late fall, when food becomes scarce or unavailable, most brown bears dig dens and hibernate until spring. Pregnant sows usually enter the dens first, and these individuals, with their newborn cubs, are the last to leave them in spring.

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