

BEAR FACTS FOR JUNIORS

DON'T BE FOOLED BY THEIR CUDDLY APPEARANCE REAL BEARS ARE BIG & SCARY

Here are some facts for you

Only eight types of bear exist.



Brown Bear



Polar Bear



Sun Bear



Spectacled Bear



Giant panda bear



Sloth bear



American black bear



Asian black bear

They live in a wide variety of locations throughout the Northern Hemisphere which is north of the equator and partly in the Southern Hemisphere which is south of the equator.



Northern Hemisphere

Equator – imaginary circle round the earth

Southern Hemisphere

Bears are found in parts of North America, South America, Europe, and Asia. They have large bodies with chunky legs, long snouts, small rounded ears, shaggy hair, and short tails. The shoulder blades and the pelvis are respectively massive. The strong forelegs are used to catch prey, to dig out dens, to dig for burrowing animals, to turn over rocks and logs to find prey, and to club large creatures. Relying as they do on strength rather than speed, they are excellent hunters.

Bears may be daytime or night-time animals. Even with their heavy build and awkward step, they are expert runners, climbers, and swimmers. Bears use shelters, such as caves and logs, as their dens; and most live in their dens during the winter sleeping for a long period of up to 100 days, this is called hibernating.

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While the polar bear is mostly a meat-eater and the giant panda feeds almost entirely on bamboo, the remaining bears have varied diets of meat and plants. They eat anything from leaves, roots, and berries to insects, old meat, fresh meat and fish.

When hunting for plants, bears choose to eat them at the stage when they are at their most healthy and edible. In more northern areas, browsing and grazing is more common early in spring and later becomes more limited. Berries may be searched for in bushes or at the tops of trees. In autumn, some bears forage large amounts of natural fruits, which affects their behaviour. Smaller bears climb trees to find such things as nuts and acorns. These can be very important to the diets of these bears and if none are found may result in long-range travel by bears looking for alternative food sources. Brown bears, with their powerful digging abilities, commonly eat roots. The panda's diet is over 99% bamboo; its strong jaws are adapted for crushing the tough stems of these plants, though they prefer to eat the more healthy leaves. Pandas are unique in having a bony extension on the wrist of the front feet which acts as a thumb, and is used for gripping bamboo shoots as the animals feed. The panda, in particular, spends 12–15 hours a day feeding.

The giant panda, followed by the spectacled bear are clearly the oldest bears. On average the polar bear is the biggest bear with adult males weighing between 350–700 kg and 2.4–3 m in length. The sun bear is the smallest weighing between 25–65 kg and 100–140 cm in length. Body weight varies throughout the year in bears of temperate and arctic climates, as they build up fat reserves in the summer and autumn and lose weight during the winter.

Despite being four-footed animals bears can stand and sit as humans do. Their front paws are flexible enough to grasp fruit and leaves. The claws on the front feet are larger than those on the back and may be a hindrance when climbing trees; black bears have the shortest claws more suited to climbing trees. They are capable of bursts of speed but soon tire and as a result mostly rely on ambush rather than the chase.

Bears have small rounded ears so as to minimize heat loss, but neither their hearing nor sight is particularly acute. Unlike many other carnivores (meat eaters) they see in colour, perhaps to help them distinguish ripe nuts and fruits. They do not have touch-sensitive whiskers on the snout; however, they have an excellent sense of smell, better than that of a dog or possibly any other mammal. They use smell for signaling to each other (either to warn off rivals or find mates) and for finding food. Smell is the principal sense used by bears to find most of their food, and they have excellent memories which help them to relocate places where they have found food before.

Bears must spend much of their time feeding in order to gain enough nutrition from foliage. Bears have been hunted since prehistoric times for their meat and fur; they have been used for forms of entertainment, such as being made to dance. The International Union for Conservation of Nature lists six bear types at risk or dying out, and even the brown bears are at risk of being wiped out in certain countries. The poaching and international trade of these bears is prohibited, but still ongoing.

The most widespread type is the brown bear, which live from Western Europe eastwards through Asia to the western areas of North America. The American black bear is limited to North America, and the polar bear is limited to the Arctic Sea. All the remaining species of bear are Asian. They occur in a range of places which include tropical lowland rainforest, both coniferous and broadleaf forests, prairies, steppes, montane grassland, alpine scree slopes, Arctic tundra and in the case of the polar bear, ice floes.

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American black bear tracks at Superior National Forest, Minnesota, the USA.

Brown and American black bears are generally active for the most part during the day, though they may forage substantially by night. Other species may be active at night, though female sloth bears with cubs may feed more at daytime to avoid competition from night time predators. Bears are overwhelmingly solitary and are considered to be the most antisocial, with the exception of mother bears and their young, bear.

The only times bears are encountered in small groups are mothers with young or occasional seasonal bounties of rich food (such as salmon runs). Fights between males can occur and older individuals may have extensive scarring, which suggests that maintaining dominance can be intense. With their acute sense of smell, bears can locate carcasses from several kilometers away. They use their sense of smell to locate other foods, encounter mates, avoid rivals and recognize their cubs.



Giant panda feeding on bamboo



Brown bear feeding on infrequent, but predictable, salmon migrations in Alaska.

The sloth bear, though not as specialised as polar bears and the panda, has lost several front teeth usually seen in bears, and developed a long, suctioning tongue to feed on the ants termites and other burrowing insects they favour. At certain times of the year, these insects can make up 90% of their diets. Some species may raid the nests of wasps and bees for the honey and immature insects, in spite of stinging from the adults. Sun bears use their long tongues to lick up both insects and honey. Fish are an important source of food for some species, and brown bears in particular gather in large numbers at salmon runs. Typically, a bear plunges into the water and seizes a fish with its jaws or front paws. The preferred parts to eat are the brain and eggs. Small burrowing mammals like rodents may be dug out and eaten.

The brown bear and both species of black bears sometimes take large animals, such as deer, mostly the young and weak. These animals may be taken by a short rush and ambush, though hiding young may be stifled out and pounced on. The polar bear mainly preys on seals, stalking them from the ice or breaking into their dens. They primarily eat the highly digestible blubber. Large mammalian prey is typically killed by a bite to the head or neck, or (in the case of young) simply pinned down and mauled. Predatory behaviour in bears is typically taught to the young by the mother.

Bears are prolific scavengers, stealing food stores from rodents, and carcasses from other predators. For hibernating species, weight gain is important as it provides nourishment during winter dormancy. A brown bear can eat 41 kg of food and gain 2–3 kg of fat a day prior to entering its den.

Bears produce a number of vocal and non-vocal sounds. Tongue-clicking, grunting or chuffing is made between mothers and cubs or courting couples, while moaning, huffing, snorting or blowing air is made when an individual is stressed. Barking is produced during times of alarm, excitement or to give away the animal's position. Warning sounds include jaw-clicking and lip-popping, while teeth-chatters,

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bellows, growls, roars and pulsing sounds are made in aggressive encounters. Cubs may squeal, bawl, bleat or scream when in distress and make motor-like humming when comfortable or nursing.

Bears of northern regions, including the American black bear and the grizzly bear, hibernate in the winter. During hibernation, the bear's metabolism slows down, its body temperature decreases slightly, and its heart rate slows from a normal value of 55 to just 9 beats per minute. Bears normally do not wake during their hibernation, and can go the entire period without eating, drinking, peeing or pooping. A plug is formed in the anus, and is expelled when the bear wakes in the spring. If they have stored enough body fat, their muscles remain in good condition.

Female bears give birth during the hibernation period, and are roused when doing so. Pregnancy lasts 6–9 months, and litter size can be up to four cubs. Giant pandas may give birth to twins but they can only feed one cub and the other is left to die. Cubs are born blind and helpless with at most a thin layer of hair, relying on their mother for warmth. The milk of the female bear is rich in fat and antibodies and cubs may feed for up to a year after they are born. By 2–3 months, cubs can follow their mother outside the den. They usually follow her on foot, but sloth bear cubs may ride on their mother's back. Male bears play no role in raising cubs. Infanticide, where an adult male kills the cubs of another, has been recorded in polar bears, brown bears and American black bears but not in other types. Males kill young cubs to make the female fertile again. Cubs may flee and the mother defends them even at the cost of her life. Bears can be legally hunted in Sweden, except when they have cubs.



Brown bear cubs with their mother in a forest in Sweden



A female Scandinavian brown bear with her cub