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NORTHWEST WILDLIFE PRESERVATION SOCIETY

Grizzly Bear

Ursus arctos



By Rowena Shi

The grizzly bear is an iconic mammal found across the northern hemisphere in areas of pristine wilderness. Grizzly bears are often referred to by several names depending on location and these can include brown bear, silvertip bear, and Kodiak bear. However they are all one species. The grizzly, though often maligned and misunderstood, is actually an intelligent, tolerant and powerful animal.

Characteristics

Grizzly bears are among the largest land carnivores in the world, exceeded only by the polar bear. Males are 38% larger than females and typically reach a weight of 750-850 pounds depending on where they live. The heaviest recorded grizzly was 1,500 pounds found on Kodiak island, Alaska. Grizzlies grow to an average size of 4 feet to the top of their shoulders when on all fours and can stretch nearly 10 feet when standing. The large hump found on their shoulders is mainly composed of muscle mass. This provides them with exceptional digging power useful when carving out dens or searching for food. Grizzlies are avid swimmers and very fast runners, reaching speeds of up to 64 km/h in a sprint. Like most other bears, grizzlies have short, stubby tails.

The fur of a grizzly bear can be anywhere from a cream colour to dark chocolate brown. The tips of their fur are white or silver which gives them a grizzled look, and led to their name, the grizzly bear. Grizzly bears have 42 teeth. Grizzlies in the wild live to an average of 25 years, which is close to the life expectancy of most other bear species.

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Life Cycle

Grizzly Bears in British Columbia generally mate between May and mid-July. Female grizzlies usually are first able to produce cubs at around 4 ½ years of age. Female Grizzly Bears breed every 3 to 4 years, but it may be longer between litters in locations without a good food supply or in a harsh environment. Because most do not breed beyond age 20, female grizzlies will bear no more than four or five litters in a lifetime.

Cubs are usually born between the end of January and early March, within their den site. While still in a dormant state, the grizzly mother gives birth and cares for her nearly hairless cubs. The average litter size is two, but can range as high as four. The number of cubs in a litter depends upon the female's body weight. Cubs are about 15-20 cm long and weigh slightly more than 225 g - 400 g. Cubs gain weight very fast due to the high fat content of their mother's milk (about 33% fat). When they leave the den in the spring they weigh about 8 kg and continue gaining weight rapidly in the summer and enter the winter den around 45 kg (100 lb). They can weigh as much as 60 kg at the end of their first year. The grizzly mother continues to nurse them until late fall as she teaches them to climb trees in reaction to danger, swim and forage and hunt for food. At the end of the cubs' second winter, the mother sends them out to fend for themselves and establish their own territories. Grizzly mothers form deep bonds with their cubs, fiercely protecting them from adult males and other predators, until they are two years old. In June of the third year, adult females usually breed again, and they chase the cubs who are now quite large, off to become self-sufficient.



Grizzly bears reach sexual maturity between 4 and 5 years and are considered fully grown by 8 to 10 years of age.

Habitat

Grizzly bears are found in many different habitats, from dense forests to subalpine meadows, open plains and arctic tundra. In North America, grizzly bears are found in western Canada, Alaska, Wyoming, Montana, Idaho and a potentially a small population in Washington state. Historically, they could be found from Alaska to Mexico and from California to Ohio.

The grizzly bear is a solitary animal. Individual bears have a home range, but these may overlap and are not fiercely defended.

Good grizzly bear habitat includes an adequate seasonal food supply, appropriate denning sites, the presence of some type of cover or shelter, access to mates, and isolation from human disturbance. Since nearly half of the mountain national parks are composed of rock and ice, habitat is fragmented. Consequently, concentrated seasonal food sources and other life requisites are widely dispersed in a patchy distribution that can change from year to year.

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Behaviour

Grizzly bears are omnivorous and include in their diet a huge range of food sources including berries, salmon, grasses, sedges, honey, insects, bird's eggs, tree bark, acorns and small to large mammals.

Grizzly Bears tend to be shy, solitary animals, except for females with cubs, and adults during the mating season. In some areas, the only grizzly bear social groups are sows with their young cubs. Bears will also sometimes congregate during the salmon spawning season to feed. Bears mark their trees, not as a sign of their territory, but as a signal to one another to avoid other bears. Grizzly bears may use marking as a form of communication, including biting, scratching, clawing, and rubbing of regular "mark" trees. Marked trails consist of a series of impressions in the ground often several centimetres deep and often lead up to the base of a favourite tree.

Grizzlies usually avoid humans: But they do have the potential to be extremely aggressive in response to threats to cubs, food, or individual space. Especially if a grizzly bear gets caught unaware or by surprise.

Displays of aggression may involve any of the following; vocalizations such as woofing and growling, direct stares with ears laid back, turning sideways to display size, jaw popping, swatting, bluff charges, or in extreme cases, physical contact.

Usually grizzlies tend to avoid such confrontations with humans. So the chances of bears attacking people in these types of circumstances are very low, but can occur.

Threats

Grizzly bears have few natural enemies and adult males have nothing to fear except for potentially larger bears. Females with cubs can be vulnerable to wolf packs.

By far and away the largest threat to grizzlies are humans. Grizzlies are hunted primarily as game animals throughout western Canada and Alaska in spring and fall. They are illegally hunted by both the landowners seeing the bears as a threat to their livestock, and poachers interested in their hides, teeth, claws and internal organs for the Asian medical market. For many years across North America, there has been voiced concern about the illegal killing of grizzlies, but there is a growing world medical market for bear parts, especially gall bladders; some poachers even film the death of the bear to show that the gall bladders are real.

In 2012, estimated populations of the grizzly were 700 in Alberta, 15,000 in British Columbia, and 4,000 to 5,000 in the Yukon and Northwest Territories. The grizzly's population is gradually shrinking in some areas. The B.C. government estimates that hunting, poaching, and other human related activities are responsible for the deaths of 6,335 grizzlies every year. Although their natural life span can be 25-30 unfortunately, 95% of the grizzly bears who live past age 2 in North America die at the hands of humans from gunshot. People are the biggest threat to grizzlies not only because of hunters, but also because of the increasing human population and the resulting destruction of prime grizzly bear habitat. Grizzly bears have huge natural ranges and these are often threatened or disturbed by increased human activity and population expansion.

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What We Can Do To Help

For 20 years, governments in Canada and the U.S. have recognized that the grizzly bear is a sensitive species in need of additional protection. The Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) has just released its second assessment of the status of Canada's iconic grizzly bear. The report found that while many parts of Canada support healthy grizzly populations, 16 subpopulations in western Alberta and southern B.C. are at risk of continued decline and eventual extinction. COSEWIC concluded that the grizzly bear is a species of "Special Concern" that should be listed under Canada's Species at Risk Act. Grizzly bears require large scale protection of their habitat throughout their range and much stricter laws and enforcement stopping trophy hunting and poaching of these great animals.

Other Interesting Facts

The grizzly bear is one of 8 bear species worldwide.

Although grizzlies are of the order Carnivora and have the digestive system of carnivores, they are considered omnivores.

Grizzly bear claws can reach 14 centimetres long.

Grizzly bears walk in a plantigrade fashion just as humans do meaning the sole of the foot and not just the toes touch the ground.

Grizzly bears like other bears are actually not true hibernators, but instead enter a period of torpor or dormancy during winter months. During this time their body processes such as metabolism and breathing slow, however they can awaken and emerge at any time and even leave the den in search of food.

Grizzly bears have two layers of fur, the guard hairs and underfur, which keep them warm to temperatures of at least -40 degrees.

Where & When to view

British Columbia is prime bear watching territory, and home to more than half of Canada's grizzly bears, and a quarter of Canada's black bears, including the rare white Kermode (spirit) bear. Bear viewing in BC ranges from spotting a bear next to the highway to luxury wilderness adventure trips. It's possible to view bears without a guide however remember always to respect the bear and keep a safe distance when observing. Very good grizzly bear watching areas in British Columbia include the Khutzeymateen within the Great Bear Rainforest, also Knight Inlet and parks near Bella Coola.

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