

Naturalists' Notes

Black Bears' Picnic

“If you go out in the woods today
You're sure of a big surprise.
If you go out in the woods today
You'd better go in disguise.
For every bear that ever there was
Will gather there for certain, because
Today's the day the teddy bears have their picnic.”

It's the time of year when black bears picnic on Powell River's fruit trees. What they're supposed to be eating in the fall is wild berries. But black bears are opportunistic feeders. Whatever is readily available is what they like best. A full bird feeder provides a nice light snack. A tree hung with ripe fruit is a good entrée. From August until sometime in November, bears take every opportunity presented to them to fatten up for their winter sleep.

Bears don't actually hibernate. When an animal hibernates, its body temperature drops to just above freezing, its breathing slows and its heartbeat is almost imperceptible, making them very difficult to arouse. That doesn't happen with bears. They do enter a state of dormancy, which means that they can sleep in the same position for months at a time, yet they can come out of that sleep suddenly—and do if they're disturbed. For bears, a deep winter sleep is an efficient way to pass the time, living off their stored body fat when food is less plentiful in the world outside their den.

Even after months of sleeping, a bear's den is free of excrement. The last few days before entering the den, the bear consumes only roughage, things like leaves and evergreen needles, which passes through its digestive system and plugs the end of its bowel. The plug isn't voided until the bear emerges from the den in the spring. Instead, the bear's body waste is recycled, turning the toxic compounds into protein. Researchers are intensely interested in this process, hoping it will lead to a breakthrough in the treatment of kidney failure in humans.

Bears breed in late spring or early summer, but the embryo doesn't begin to grow until the female enters her den for her winter sleep. The following January or February the cub or cubs are born, blind, practically hairless and tiny, each weighing about half a pound. It takes until May for the cubs to grow enough hair and reach a respectable 5 pounds before the mother bear will lead them from the den. Her priority is teaching survival skills to her offspring, and eating is high on the list. Once out of the den, the cubs eat what Mom eats, feasting on fresh sprouts in the spring, salmon in the summer and berries in the fall. Unless, of course, they happen upon plums lying at the bottom of a tree near a house, and once again it's a teddy bears' picnic.

This article was written by Sharon Thomas for the Malaspina Naturalists Club. For more information on local fauna readers can contact the Malaspina Naturalist Club at 604.485.6134.