



About Brown Bears

The preservation of a naturally regulated population of brown bears was a primary purpose for several expansions of Katmai since its establishment in 1918 as well as for its designation as a national park in 1980. Thus, protection of bears and their access to important habitats is a primary consideration in the management of human activities in Katmai.

When bears emerge from their dens in late March or early April, very little food is available, and they seek out areas where plants green-up earliest to carry them through this critical period of food shortage. The fortuitous discovery of a carcass of an animal that died during the winter provides a lucky bear with an unexpected feast. As June approaches, some bears prey on newborn moose calves. Salmon migrating up the Naknek drainage first arrive in the park in late June and, for the rest of the summer, the distribution of bears reflects the pattern of salmon spawning. Berries, such as crowberries and cranberries, as well as sedges and other vegetation, add variety to the bears' diet.

An abundance of high-protein food is necessary for brown bears, which must not only maintain their large weight, but must gain several hundred pounds during the few short months of summer. In order to obtain the food it needs, a bear must roam widely and take advantage of any opportunity that arises to obtain food. A bear is very curious and will investigate anything that arouses its interest, relying primarily on its phenomenally acute sense of smell, as well as its sense of hearing and its often-underestimated sense of sight. Bears are capable of learning from a single experience and, once a bear discovers a convenient source of food, it will remember it and will seek food there again.

As October passes and winter approaches, the amount and quality of available food diminishes to the point where it can no longer support an active bear. As the days become shorter and colder, a bear digs a den in a location where the soil is deep enough and cohesive enough and where the blowing snow will accumulate and seal the den's entrance from the severe cold outside. The bear's body undergoes profound physiological changes, and it enters a state of hibernation which will last through most of the winter.

Once every three or four years, if she has found adequate food, a female brown bear gives birth to two or so cubs while she hibernates. After the family emerges the following spring, the cubs will learn, by watching their mother, everything they will need to know to survive on their own – how to find food, where to dig a winter den, and how to recognize and respond to danger.

A mother bear fiercely protects her cubs from anything she perceives as a threat. Because brown bears typically live in fairly open country where there are few trees that the cubs can climb to escape danger, they must rely on their mother's protection if they are to survive. What would threaten a brown bear? Besides people, other bears. Bears are very antisocial animals. In fact, if a large bear has the chance, it will catch and even kill a smaller bear. Commonly a bear will flee as soon as it sights another bear, without taking the time to evaluate the other bear's size. In spite of this wariness, however, three-fourths of the young bears in a population die before they reach the age of six. Thus it is the large bears, particularly the adult males, which have a major role in regulating the size of bear populations.

Such antisocial animals face quite a dilemma when they arrive at a salmon-spawning stream and encounter the other bears that are also attracted to the stream. If a bear is going to remain at the stream and be able to

successfully catch fish, it must be able to tolerate, to some extent, the proximity of other bears. Still, most bears at salmon-spawning streams spend a considerable amount of effort in evaluating the threat posed by other bears and avoiding close encounters with them.

Knowledge of the world in which a bear lives helps us understand conflicts between bears and people so we can take steps to prevent them, thereby protecting bears as well as ourselves.

There are two major ways in which bears and people come into conflict. The first involves surprise close-range encounters. If you suddenly encounter a bear at very close range, it is possible that the bear may not know whether you are a person or another bear. If it thinks you are a threat and that it cannot escape, it may believe that it will have to fight for its life in order to survive the encounter. You should avoid such situations by being alert and making noise that any bear in the area will recognize as indicating an approaching person. If you do encounter a bear, help the bear to recognize that you are a person and not a threat, and back away to give the bear more space.

Even if a nearby bear does not seem disturbed by your presence, keep in mind that, unlike people, bears are not sociable. Your presence can make it difficult for a bear to concentrate on fishing and may cause the bear to stop fishing and leave sooner than it otherwise would have. If you stay at least 50 yards from bears, you will make it easier for them to remain in this area. You will also help ensure that people will continue to have opportunities to enjoy watching bears.

The second major type of conflict arises when people allow a bear to obtain their food, thereby teaching it that people are a convenient source of food. After such an experience, the bear is likely to be attracted toward people and may approach people aggressively with the hope that, by doing so, it will be rewarded with food. This situation is very dangerous for people and is likely to result in the eventual destruction of the bear in order to protect people. The only solution is to prevent the situation from developing, recognize that a bear will eat any food that it discovers, and do your best to ensure that no bear obtains food from you or in any way associate it with you.

Brown bears are one of the components that make Katmai a very special place, and Katmai is one of the few places where we have the opportunity to show that we are able to live with bears, on their terms.