



Arctic

National Wildlife Refuge

Brown Bears

Brown bears are the undisputed monarchs of the open tundra and mountains of Alaska. On the Arctic Refuge, they live farther north than any others of their species. Also called grizzlies because of the “grizzled” blond tips of their fur, brown bears can be shades of cream, brown, or black.

Brown bears escape the Refuge’s long winters by hibernating for up to eight months each year. During this long sleep, bears do not eat or drink. They do, however, give birth and nurse their cubs.

Outside the den, brown bears explore widely for foods that are often in short supply. While spring snows remain, bears eat carrion, ground squirrels, and roots. In early June, some bears, especially sows with young, prey on newborn caribou. This opportunity lasts only a few weeks, until the calves are too nimble to catch. During the summer, brown bears feed mainly on greens. Some search high into the mountains for new growth emerging from late-melting snows. Later, the bears consume large quantities of berries. When snows return, often by mid-September, the bears again dig for ground squirrels and roots.

Most Refuge brown bears den in the mountains south of the coastal plain. Because the Refuge is underlain by permanently frozen ground, bears select rock caves, or sandy soils that have thawed more than four feet deep. The soils can collapse easily unless the top four inches are frozen, so bears must wait, usually until mid-October, for a hard freeze before excavating their dens.

Brown bears on the Refuge face long winter hibernations and limited food resources. As a result, they have small bodies, low reproductive rates, and slowly

maturing young. This northernmost population has remained remarkably stable, however. The only enemies these monarchs have are old age, other brown bears, and occasionally man.

Brown bears are plentiful on the Refuge. Listening at night through paper-thin tent walls, walking through dense willows, or cresting a hilltop - the possibility of meeting a bear heightens our senses. Without these magnificent animals, the special wilderness quality of the Arctic Refuge would be greatly diminished.

