



Arctic

National Wildlife Refuge

Polar Bears

It's a magnificent, powerful, and fearless animal; the world's largest land carnivore. The polar bear is a unique part of our natural heritage - directly connected to the Arctic Refuge. How? Every year, several of these impressive animals come to the Refuge to den and give birth. Many others congregate along the coast of the Refuge in October and November.

These bears are part of the Beaufort Sea population, estimated at 2,000 animals. They use an area extending more than 800 miles along the north coasts of Alaska and Canada. The bears spend most of their time on the drifting pack ice feeding, resting, and denning. Each year, however, many of the pregnant females come to shore to dig maternity dens in snow drifts.

The pregnant females move onshore in late fall. When and where they go depends on weather, formation of sea ice, and snowdrift patterns. The pregnant bears dig their dens in November, then give birth to one or two tiny cubs in December or January. The mothers nurse and care for the young until March or early April, when they emerge from the dens.

After several days getting used to the outside environment, including short trips to strengthen the cubs, the families leave the dens. They move back to the sea ice to hunt ringed seals and other prey. The cubs stay with their mothers, learning to hunt, for about the next two and a half years.

Along Alaska's coast, the highest density of polar bear land dens occurs within the Refuge. Many more dens have been found there than would be expected if bears denned uniformly along the coast.

One reason may be that the Refuge coastal plain and northern foothills have more uneven terrain than areas to the west, allowing snow drifts to form more readily. Within the Refuge, bears have denned in the Canning River Delta, Camden Bay area, and Pokok Lagoon bluffs.

The Arctic Refuge is the only national conservation area where polar bears regularly den and the most consistently used polar bear land denning area in Alaska. These are just two of many reasons the Refuge is such an incredible place

