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WILDLIFE DIVISION

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As fall slowly creeps towards the winter ahead, all of us are preparing in one way or another for the months ahead. Wildlife is no different. Those species that do not migrate south, also begin to prepare for the winter; gathering food, putting on layers of fat, or perhaps thickening their fur or 'coat'. Other species however handle our long cold winters by sleeping it away.



One example of such a critter is our black bear. Contrary to what many folks think, bears are not true hibernators, but rather pass the winter months by entering into a lethargic state referred to as 'torpor'.

Chipmunks and woodchucks are examples of true hibernators. Their body temperatures fall to that of the surrounding air temperatures (often times near freezing). Their heart rate lowers to perhaps only four to five beats per minute (bpm). However, they will wake periodically to eat, drink, and defecate. Some species however will just live off of stored body fat.

Bears on the other hand are periodic long-term sleepers, deep sleepers. Their body temperature drops only slightly and breathing slows. However their heart rate does lower significantly from 40-50 bpm to 10-12 bpm. They can also wake almost immediately. They also do not eat, drink, or defecate AND the females give birth to cubs. Newborn cubs weigh about 12 ounces, are nearly hairless, and their eyes are closed. They depend on their mother's warmth and milk for survival while in the

den. Yet by late March, they are fully furred, weigh between 3 to 10 pounds, and their eyes are usually blue, but will turn to brown in color during the following year.

The denning period in Maine may last up to six months, and is largely influenced by food availability. In years of poor or low fall foods, particularly oaks and beechnuts (but also other foods like apples), bears may enter their dens as early as late September. In years of abundant fall foods, bears will often den as late as early December. Many bears have been reported or sighted this month by our deer hunters indicating that food sources are abundant enough such that many bears have indeed delayed heading for their winter sleep.

So while we are staying all snug and warm inside, keep in mind what are big, furry friend is experiencing in the confines of a blown down, hollow tree or even on a ground nest. Enjoy the winter and see you when the bears emerge in the spring!



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