INTO BROWN BEAR COUNTRY


Author Will Troyer has spent nearly 5 decades researching, observing, and managing brown bears. He was a pioneer in scientific research on bears and he currently applies this information in managing bears, their habitat, and bear-watching tourism. This book is a synthesis of those years of research and personal experiences. It has been written as a monograph that is interesting and useful to the general public. With the growing interest in bear-watching and public participation in agency planning and decision-making, accurate information on bear ecology and behavior is particularly desirable.

The format of the book is a series of short chapters on specific aspects of the life history of the brown bear. Each chapter begins with photographs and an anecdote that portrays the essence of that chapter. I found this organizational approach interesting and likely to be appealing for readers that may not be intimately familiar with brown bears. The book has a comprehensive index, and it is also easy to find specific information based on the title of each chapter. Related readings are presented in the References section at the end of the book.

The book begins with a brief overview of bear taxonomy. In Alaska, there are 2 sub-species within the brown bear-grizzly complex: coastal brown bears (Ursus arctos middendorffi) and interior grizzly (Ursus arctos horribilis). Troyer focuses his book on the coastal brown bear, which grows larger and is generally less aggressive. The differences in size and demeanor between subspecies appear to be related to range-specific differences in climate and food sources.

Brown bears occur in a wide variety of habitats reflective of their expansive range in Alaska. Descriptions of preferred brown bear habitat in Alaska vary notably from Southeast Alaska across Prince William Sound to Bristol Bay and the Kuskokwim Delta. Brown bears require large, isolated areas with denning habitat and plentiful food supply (primarily salmon and berries).

Chapters 3 through 8 describe multiple aspects of the natural history of the coastal brown bear. The informative sequence progresses from birth and ‘growing up’ stages to becoming a part of the ‘bear society’: home range, mating and feeding, and hibernation. Mating occurs during late spring with a delayed implantation of the fetus after about 6 mo, around the time the female begins hibernation. The cubs weigh <1 pound when born in January or February. Cubs stay with the sow from their 1st spring emergence until their 3rd spring. Most females are sexually mature at 4 to 6 y, and can produce a litter every 4 y up to about age 20. Except for sows during the cub-rearing stage or during the short mating season, coastal brown bears are solitary animals. Courtship can be as short as 1 day or as long as a few weeks.

After coming out of hibernation bears typically feed on vegetation and carrion. By early summer, spawning salmon become the primary food source, supplemented by berries. Bears spend much of their time salmon fishing in close proximity to one another, particularly on the smaller streams. Where salmon are abundant, few confrontations occur. However, crowding on the stretches can result in fights.

Brown bears derive nutrition from accumulated fat during hibernation and are able to sustain bone growth and produce rich milk for their cubs. Denning normally takes place at higher elevations on well-drained, moderately steep, snow-covered slopes. The timing of entrance and emergence from the den varies by sex and presence of cubs.

Chapters 9 and 10 offer insights on a range of topics from bear predation on other species to sensory perception and play as a common behavior. Brown bears can be successful predators on the young of other wildlife, but the opportunity is limited. They are most successful capturing spawning salmon. Sensory perception is critical for danger warnings and locating food and other bears. Their keen smell and hearing are the bears’ primary means of de-