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HELVE^{IA}

Magazine for Members of the Swiss Society of New Zealand Inc

FAUNA IN SWITZERLAND

Brown Bear

How could we have a Helvetia dedicated to the canton of Bern without Bern's beloved bear on the last page? Here it is:

The brown bear is a large bear distributed across much of northern Eurasia and North America. While the brown bear's range has shrunk, and it has faced local extinction, it is not endangered, with a total population of approximately 200,000. In Europe, there are 14,000 brown bears in ten fragmented populations. A small population of around 70 brown bears lives in central Italy (Apennine mountains, Abruzzo and Latium), protected by strong laws. Some of these Italian bears have wandered into Switzerland.



Brown bear - ursus arctos

Brown bears can grow to over 2 m in body length and 1.5m in shoulder height. The heaviest bear ever killed weighed over 1000 kg. Bears have long, thick fur, especially in winter. Bears prefer semi-open country, usually in mountainous areas. The warming of the arctic region has allowed the species to move farther north into what was once exclusively the domain of the polar bear.

The brown bear is primarily nocturnal. In summer, it puts on a lot of weight to make it through winter, when it

becomes very lethargic. Although they are not full hibernators, and can be woken easily, both sexes like to spend winter in a protected spot such as a cave, crevice, or hollow log.

Brown bears are mostly solitary, although they may gather in large numbers at major food sources and form social hierarchies based on age and size. Adult male bears are particularly aggressive and are avoided by adolescent males. Female bears with cubs rival adult males in aggressiveness.

Females mature sexually between the age of 5 and 7 years, while males usually mate a few years later when they are large and strong enough to successfully compete with other males for mating rights. The average litter has one to four cubs, usually two. At birth, the cubs are blind, toothless, hairless, and weigh less than 450 grams. They feed on their mother's milk until spring or even early summer. At this time, the cubs weigh 7 to 9 kilograms and have developed enough to follow her and begin to forage for solid food.

Cubs remain with their mother for two to four years, during which time they learn survival techniques, such as which foods have the highest nutritional values and where to obtain them; how to hunt, fish, and defend themselves; and where to den. An adult male bear may kill the cubs of another bear. Cubs flee up a tree when they see a strange male bear, and the mother defends them even though the male may be twice her size.

Despite their reputation, most brown bears derive over half of their dietary food energy from vegetable matter. However, in some areas of Russia and Alaska brown bears feed mostly on spawning salmon. Brown bears only occasionally prey on large mammals, such as deer or sheep. When they attack these animals, they tend to choose the young ones as they are easier to catch. When hunting, the bear pins its prey to the ground and then tears bits off and eats it alive. They also feed on carrion and use their size to scare other predators such as wolves away from their kill.

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