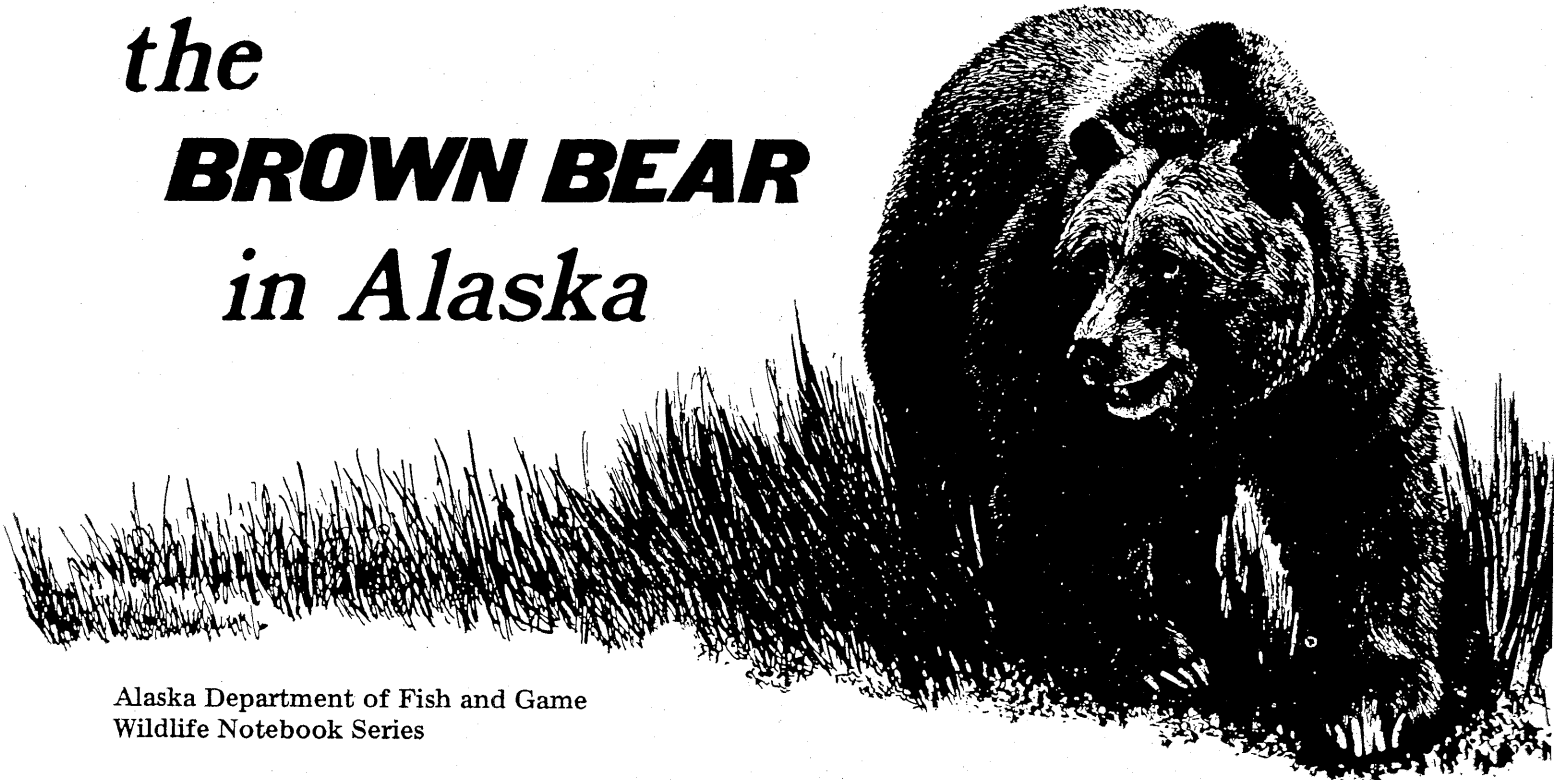


the **BROWN BEAR** in Alaska



Alaska Department of Fish and Game
Wildlife Notebook Series

BROWN BEARS (*Ursus arctos*) occur throughout Alaska except on the islands south of Frederick Sound in Southeastern Alaska, the islands west of Unimak in the Aleutian Chain and the islands of the Bering Sea. They also occur in Europe, Asia, Canada and in limited numbers in a few western states. Brown bears are very much a part of the Alaska scene and are a favorite topic with most hunters, hikers and fishermen.

GENERAL DESCRIPTION: Until recently, taxonomists listed brown and grizzly bears as separate species. Observation of successful interbreeding between them indicated a single species and study of skull characteristics substantiated this hypothesis. All brown and grizzly bears are now classified as *Ursus arctos*.

In popular usage brown bear refers to members of this species found in coastal areas, while those found inland are commonly called grizzlies. In this paper "brown bear" is used in the general sense; it refers to all members of *Ursus arctos*. The brown bear resembles its close relative, the black bear, *Ursus americanus*. The brown bear, however, is usually larger, has a more prominent shoulder hump and longer, straighter claws. Other characteristics such as the shape and relative massiveness of the head help to differentiate these species. The most positive identification is provided by measurement of the upper rear molar. In *Ursus arctos*, the length of the crown of this tooth is more than $1\frac{1}{4}$ inches. In *Ursus americanus*, it is less than $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches. Color is not a very reliable key in differentiating these bears for both species have many color phases. Black bears, for example, occur in many hues of brown. Brown bear colors range from dark brown through blond.

Bear weights vary throughout the year. Bears weigh less in the spring and early summer. They gain weight rapidly during late summer and fall and are waddling fat just prior to denning. At this time most mature males weigh between 500 and 900 pounds with extremely large individuals weighing as much as 1,400 pounds. Females weigh one half to three quarters as much.

An extremely large brownie has a skull approaching 18 inches long. Such a bear when standing on its hind feet is about nine feet tall. Inland bears are usually smaller than coastal bears, perhaps because they lack the rich supply of fish.

Brown bears have been known to live 30 years in captivity where they do not have to forage for food. In the wild, a brownie is an old-timer at 20.

LIFE HISTORY: Mating takes place from May through July with the peak of activity in early June. Brown bears generally do not have strong mating ties, but individual bears have been observed remaining with their mates for over a month. The hairless young, weighing less than a pound, are born the following January and

February in a winter den. Litter size ranges from one to four cubs, but two is most common. The cubs remain with their mothers through their second year. Brown bears give birth to a new litter every two or three years. There is strong evidence that the usual interval between litters is three years.

During the time the cubs accompany their mother, the family ties are strong and the sow is quite protective towards her young. Occasionally a sow will adopt cubs from another sow. This may explain sightings of sows with six or more cubs, or sows with cubs and yearlings at the same time.

FOOD HABITS: The brown bear is omnivorous. Common foods include berries, grass, sedge, horsetail, cow parsnip, fish and roots of many plants. Flesh of game or domestic animals is eaten when it is available. The brown bear is probably not a significant predator on big game species except possibly during spring when the young are most vulnerable. Bears are fond of carrion and will feed on carcasses of any animals they find. Some instances of cannibalism have been recorded.

Bears often congregate where food is abundant, and may be seen fishing side by side in salmon streams. In late July of 1961, biologist Lee Miller observed 60 at one time on the McNeil River. Many of these were sows and cubs.

WINTER DORMANCY: During winter, bears experience a period of dormancy when they spend time in dens, their body temperature drops and their general metabolic rate is reduced. This is not considered complete hibernation since they do occasionally emerge from their dens to forage, particularly during spells of warm weather and during years when food is scarce prior to denning.

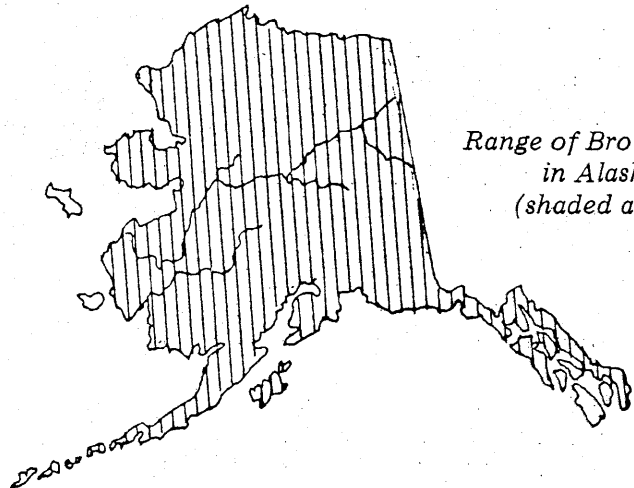
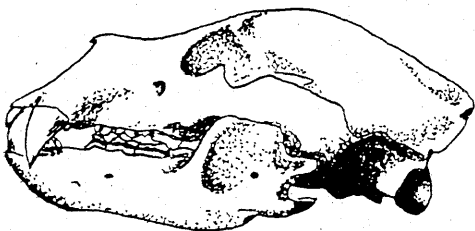
Bears usually enter dormancy in November and December and emerge during April or May. Dormancy is longer in areas having severe climates. Females with new-born cubs emerge later than single bears. The den is often a natural shelter between tree roots or rocks or may be an excavation dug by the bear. Dens are most common at high elevations near timberline, but may be found anywhere from sea level to alpine areas.

HUNTING: Bear hunting for trophy animals is popular in Alaska. Occasionally brown bears are hunted for the flesh. Bear meat should be thoroughly cooked to prevent contracting trichinosis, a parasite-caused disease which may be fatal to man. Bear hunting seasons are held in both spring and fall in some areas but only in the fall in other areas. Cubs and sows with cubs may not be killed.

A bear should be examined closely, preferably with binoculars, before shooting to determine if the pelt has rubbed spots since skins without rubbed spots make more desirable trophies. Rubbed bears are more common in the spring than in the fall. Bears grow dense fur in the fall and shed during the spring for a less dense summer coat. A little extra time spent observing a bear before the trigger is pulled may also prevent the hunter from shooting a sow which has cubs hidden nearby.

RESEARCH AND CONSERVATION: The Alaska Department of Fish and Game conducts various studies to enable it to recommend desirable types of hunting at intensities which will not over-harvest populations. Research activities include detailed assessment of harvest, movement studies, population surveys and basic life history studies. Preservation of bear habitat is as important as prevention of over-harvest. As Alaska develops, it will be necessary for land-controlling agencies to recognize that in order to maintain wildlife habitat, restrictions will be required in some areas of agriculture, logging and oil development.

Sterling Eide
Reprinted 1977



*Range of Brown Bear
in Alaska
(shaded area)*