



exploring passions and perspectives in Jasper, AB

(/)

PARKS CANADA // MARK BRADLEY

May 1, 2016





Bears in Jasper National Park have emerged from hibernation approximately two weeks ahead of their typical schedule. Jasper photographer Mike Gere had his lens trained on this bruin on the last day of the ski season. According to some First Nations cultures, bears represent a welcoming and a goodbye gesture.// **MIKE GERE**

BEARS EMERGING EARLY (AND

BEARS EMERGING EARLY (AND HUNGRY)

Look who's up.

Bears are being spotted in Jasper a bit earlier than usual this year. They've been active near the golf course, the highways and even the ski hill.

But how do they know when it's time to wake up from their long winter's nap?

Unlike teenage humans, it's not the smell of bacon and eggs that gets these big boys and girls out of bed in the spring. According to experts, it's a combination of temperature, solar radiation, daylight...and whether or not their dens are getting flooded out.

"If the solar rays are strong enough to melt the snow their den is basically like living in a shower stall...and no one wants to do that," said Gord Stenhouse, Alberta's former top grizzly bear expert who now carries on his research through the Foothills Research Institute (fRi).





Researchers are fitting bears with devices which record minute movements; the data gathered will give them information on birthing patterns while females hibernate. //

MIKE GERE

Bears hibernate in the fall—pregnant females den first, followed by non-pregnant females, followed by the males. When nap time's over, the pattern reverses: boar grizzlies are first out of bed in the spring, while females with cubs remain curled up the longest. Researchers suspect this is nature's way of increasing energy efficiency for needy bears-to-be.

"We can suggest adult females are trying to minimize the energy they expend during hibernation because they put that into reproduction and nursing," Stenhouse said.

Most females have twins; bears with a single cub are usually first-time moms. But whether or not both babies emerge in the spring depends on how the birthing, and the nursing, went. On April 27, Stenhouse was observing a female grizzly as she woke from her den site approximately 14 km south of the Jasper townsite at 2,400 m elevation (for reference, the peak of Marmot Basin is 2,612 m). He said this particular bear emerged without cubs. He planned to return to the den to try to determine whether she gave birth at all, and if so, what could have happened to her offspring.

"If they're in poor physical condition when they go in they can use up all their energy just in hibernation. We'll go back to

the den to see if we can find some clues," he said.

In the near future, Stenhouse and his colleagues won't have to rely on such sleuthing to find out if a cub was delivered but failed to survive. New sensory instruments are being fitted on bears which already wear research collars (there are approximately 10 such bears in JNP). The devices record minute movements, such as those consistent with the birthing process. This will be the first time these types of data are gathered in the wild. The sensors have shown to corroborate video footage of captive bears' slight movements while birthing and nursing. Stenhouse predicts they'll be valuable to his larger project: comparing bears in areas disturbed by heavy industry and those in a protected setting.

Moreover, the sensors may also help tell scientists what bears are feeding on, without researchers being present. Bursts of speed observed by the monitors would be consistent with swift movements necessary to take down an ungulate, scientists hypothesize. They'll compare these fast-paced pursuits against, for example, the slow-gorge of a buffalo berry buffet.

Berries are a fall menu item, however; right now bears in Jasper are dining on golf course salads and leafy dandelions à la grassy ditch. The next course, if they're lucky, will be elk calf with aroma of campfire, then in the summer it's up to the high country for wildflower-garnished filet of marmot.

The challenges for bears, of course, come in the way of humans. Conflicts arise when people feed animals, don't dispose of their garbage properly, spill grain from train cars and drive at high speeds.

"We spend a lot of time chasing bears out of areas where the potential risk for human conflict is high," says Mark Bradley, a wildlife specialist with JNP.

For that reason, at this time of year, officials advise the same thing parents do when approaching cranky teenagers who've recently woken up and are looking to stuff their face: just stay out of their way.

