



# Deep Winter Sleep

When it looks like this out my back door, I want to go hibernate until summer returns.. (Photo/Mark Rackay)



## Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

My least favorite season has changed over the years. At one time, it was early spring. I loathe February and March. Hunting season is but a distant memory, and fishing is so far off into the future, that it is not worth thinking about. I usually spend my time staring out the window and whining about the weather. It's my springtime hobby.

In later years, my most hated season seems to be the winter as I no longer have the tolerance for the cold. Around here, winter seems to hang on, delivering frosts into May, and an occasional wet snow, just to make it interesting.

I tried the eternal summer thing while I lived in the Florida Keys. Winter was always defined, not by any cooler weather, but by the arrival of the northern

people, the condo commandos as I call them. When they went back north, it was summer again.

My solution to all of this, is hibernation. I could eat a ton of food over the summer and curl up in a sleeping bag for the duration of the winter. It works for bears, why not for an irascible old man? My wife, of many years, absolutely forbids me to try it. She said something about "laying around enough," so another idea that died in subcommittee.

Hibernation is when a mammal enters a state of suspended animation. Their breathing and heart rates slow and that allows their body temperature to drop, sometimes below freezing. All of this is so the body uses less energy.

Evolution causes some animals to hibernate, while others migrate to a warmer climate, like the condo commandos. Birds migrate, but a small animal, like a chipmunk, has no ability to cover the miles necessary to migrate, so he sleeps off the winter.

Hibernation comes in many forms. Some mammals hibernate in a den, some even hibernate during the summer

months. We had goldfish in an outdoor pond, that hung in a state of hibernation under the ice, in a state of reduced metabolic activity.

Generally, animals hibernate because food supplies become scarce during the winter months. By going into a long, deep sleep, they bypass this reduced food period, and wake up when the food is more plentiful. Animals that can find food over the winter, like deer, elk, moose, pronghorn, rabbits, and grouse, don't hibernate, as they can find food over the winter. I can present an argument that deer and elk hibernate, as sometimes they completely vanish during hunting season, but that is another story.

Hibernation is not a form of sleep, but an extended form of torpor, a state where metabolism is depressed to less than 5% of normal. The heartbeat is reduced, sometimes to less than 10 beats a minute, and some animals take a breath once every few minutes. Their brain activity becomes undetectable. This is much different from sleep, which is a resting state where unconscious functions are still performed.

By this definition, bears

don't hibernate, because their body temperature drops only slightly, and they can awake easily. A hunter can stumble upon a bear that is sleeping away the winter and be surprised how easily that bear can detect his presence, but not so with a true hibernating mammal.

When an animal enters a hibernating state during the summer months, it is called estivation. It is not as common, but it happens when food sources become scarce during summer months and the animals need to conserve energy. This is common with some animals in Africa.

Reptiles can't control their body temperature, hence the term "cold blooded." Hibernation in reptiles is called brumation. Reptiles rely on their environment to regulate their body temperature. Cold temperatures cause reptiles and amphibians to hide underground, in rock crevices and in burrows to stay warm and safe.

Hibernation is actually torpor, a state of physical or mental inactivity. Sometimes animals enter a stage of sleep called torpor or "temporary hibernation" which is not as heavy as hibernation. Torpor is involuntary

and lasts just a few hours during the daytime. Torpor is triggered by the availability of food and outside temperatures.

There is no evidence that humans can go into hibernation, the extended state of torpor, in which your body temperature, breathing, and energy expenditure drop. Humans do, however, have distant ancestors that did hibernate.

While hibernation is usually seen as a seasonal behavior, it is not exclusive to cold-weather animals. There are tropical animals that hibernate to stay cool during the hottest months. A spiny anteater from Australia, called an Echidna, will hibernate after a brush fire, waiting until food resources rebound to return to normal activities.

Several recent studies suggest that some animals hibernate for protection. Small mammals are up to 5 times more likely to die when active, from predators, than when hibernating. A hibernating animal does not move to alert it's presence, or give off any smell, making them practically undetectable to their enemies.

I read about a bat that hibernated for 344 days in a controlled environment.

Snails hibernate inside their shells, sealing the opening with mucus to retain moisture inside and prevent drying out. They can sleep for up to 3 years at a stretch, but the bat is not near the record.

The longest known hibernation belongs to the cicada that hibernates for 17 years between emergencies. During the few months that the cicadas are active, they are incredibly loud and can exceed 100 decibels in volume.

I think hibernation would make my off season much easier to handle, but my wife is still not keen on the idea. She thinks I could give the cicada a run for the money.

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