

Polar Bears in the Winter

Canada's Arctic is home to about 16,000 polar bears and about 150,000 people. Polar bears live throughout the North, along the coastlines and throughout the arctic islands from the Hudson Bay to the North Pole. Almost half of Canada's land mass is in the Arctic regions and is home to more than 60% of the worldwide polar bear population.

Polar bears are the largest land carnivores in the world. Male polar bears can grow up to 2.8 metres long and weigh over 800 kilograms. This is as much as a giraffe weighs. Even though polar bears grow to be huge, as cubs they are extremely small. When born, cubs are blind, toothless and covered in a sparse layer of soft, short fur. Newborn cubs are only about 25 centimeters long and weigh around one kilogram, but they grow rapidly thanks to their mother's rich milk which is approximately 31 percent fat. Fat is an important food for polar bears because they need the fat in their bodies to keep them warm while swimming. This is like a double layer of warmth or insulation from the cold Arctic air.

Polar bears are a marine or water mammal that feeds almost exclusively on seals because the fat from one seal gives the polar bear enough energy for three weeks. It is difficult for a polar bear to catch a swimming seal: seals swim at 30km/hour and polar bears swim at 10km/hour (compare this with a human who swims at 3km/hour). The Polar bear has keen sense of smell and can detect the seal's air hole in the ice from more than a kilometre away.

As climate change continues to reduce the thickness of sea ice in the Arctic, the future of polar bears and their habitat are at risk. Less ice means increased conflict with humans as bears spend more time on land seeking new sources of food. Some of the Polar bear populations are spending more time on land, like those in Manitoba, Ontario and southern Nunavut. Without sea ice and seals, polar bears are left to search for other food sources. They look for food in garbage dumps, sled dog yards and human food storage areas.

