

GRIZZLY BEARS

of Alaska

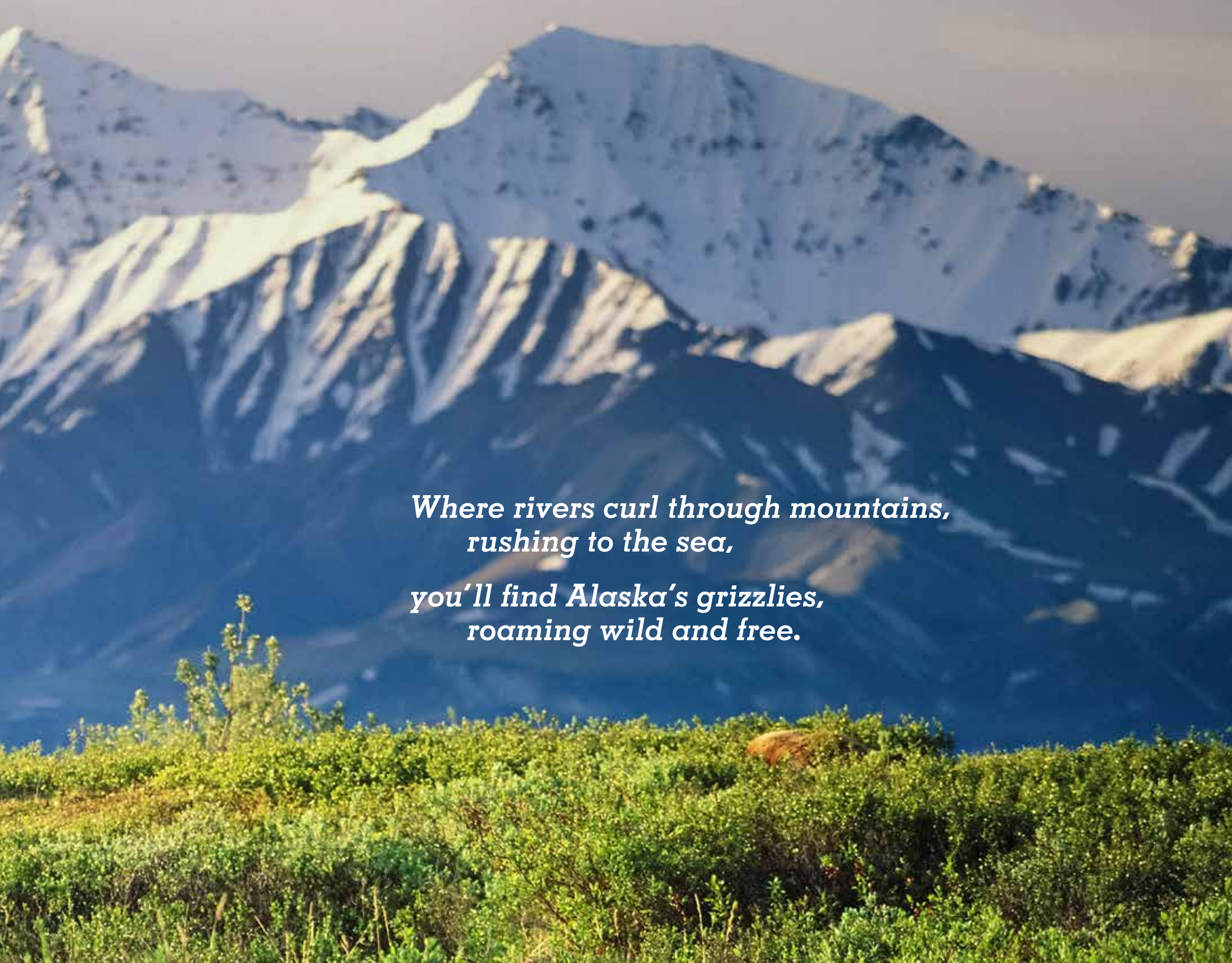


Debbie S. Miller
Photography by Patrick J. Endres

little bigfoot

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A scenic view of a snow-capped mountain range. The foreground is filled with lush green vegetation, including bushes and a small tree. The mountains in the background are covered in snow, with some rocky outcrops visible. The sky is a clear, pale blue.

*Where rivers curl through mountains,
rushing to the sea,
you'll find Alaska's grizzlies,
roaming wild and free.*



A Magnificent Creature

Alaska's most fierce land predator appears massive, from its huge tracks and three-inch claws, to its fortress of a body and **powerful jaws**. It's a grizzly bear! The hump above its muscular shoulders is unmistakable.

Grizzly bears live in wild, open country throughout Alaska. Some bears are blond or cinnamon in color, while others are golden or dark brown. Their thick fur coat has **grizzled guard hairs** with pale tips, which gives the bear its name.

Grizzlies have wide, dish-shaped faces, small eyes and ears, and a long snout. They have an **excellent sense of smell** that is four times stronger than a dog's. Their nasal cavities are full of sensitive tissues that look like honeycomb, and cover a surface that is 100 times larger than the tissues inside a human nose. Studies have found that a grizzly can smell an animal carcass from miles away.





Brown Bear or Grizzly?

Some bears live along Alaska's central and southern coasts where they have a lush habitat and **mild climate**. While they are the same species as grizzlies, these coastal bears are known as brown bears. During the summer and fall, brown bears feed on a salad bar of plants, roots, berries, and a **protein-rich diet** of salmon. Some bears dig for clams and other creatures along the ocean shore with their curved claws.

Coastal brown bears grow much bigger than inland grizzlies because of the abundance of vegetation and salmon. A subspecies of the brown bear, the **Kodiak Island brown bear**, is even bigger! An adult male Kodiak brown bear can stand ten feet tall and weigh as much as **1,500 pounds**, about the weight of 300 Chihuahuas. It is the world's largest omnivore.





What's for Breakfast?

Grizzly bears are widespread in Interior Alaska and the Arctic. They live in a **harsh environment** with frigid winter temperatures and short summers, where food can be scarce. There, the density of grizzlies is much lower than along the coast. In the Arctic there is one grizzly for every 300 square miles, compared to one brown bear per square mile on the coast.

Grizzlies feed on a mixed diet of grasses, sedges, roots, insects, and berries. Like the brown bears, grizzlies are **omnivores** because they eat plants and animals. They inhabit the land with other grazing animals such as wandering bull caribou. In the spring, grizzlies prey on the calves of moose and caribou. They also use the **powerful muscles** in their hump to dig up the tundra and turn over boulders to catch small rodents such as voles and lemmings or the Arctic ground squirrel.





Sik-Sik-Sik! When a grizzly bear approaches, a ground squirrel gives an alarm call to warn other squirrels of this dangerous predator. Then it scampers underground to hide in its burrow.





Leaving the Den

In the quiet cold of winter, grizzlies are snug underground in their **snow-covered dens**. In January or February, pregnant grizzlies give birth to **tiny, hairless cubs** that only weigh a pound. Within a few months, the cubs quickly grow into fifteen-pound bundles of energy thanks to their mother's rich milk. Mother grizzlies usually have two cubs, but will sometimes give birth to three.

In Denali National Park, the warm spring sunshine melts the winter snow and the sweet smell of earth drifts through the air. After **seven months of hibernation**, the bears emerge from their dens. Mother grizzlies hungrily sniff and search for food in the mountain valleys while their cubs playfully follow them. They discover old frozen cranberries and the leftover winter carcass of a moose, and they nibble on fresh green shoots of grasses and sedges.





Can't Catch Me!

Grizzly and brown bear cubs **love to play**. They wrestle, tumble, roll in the snow, and play with objects they discover. Siblings enjoy playing tag and tussling with each other.

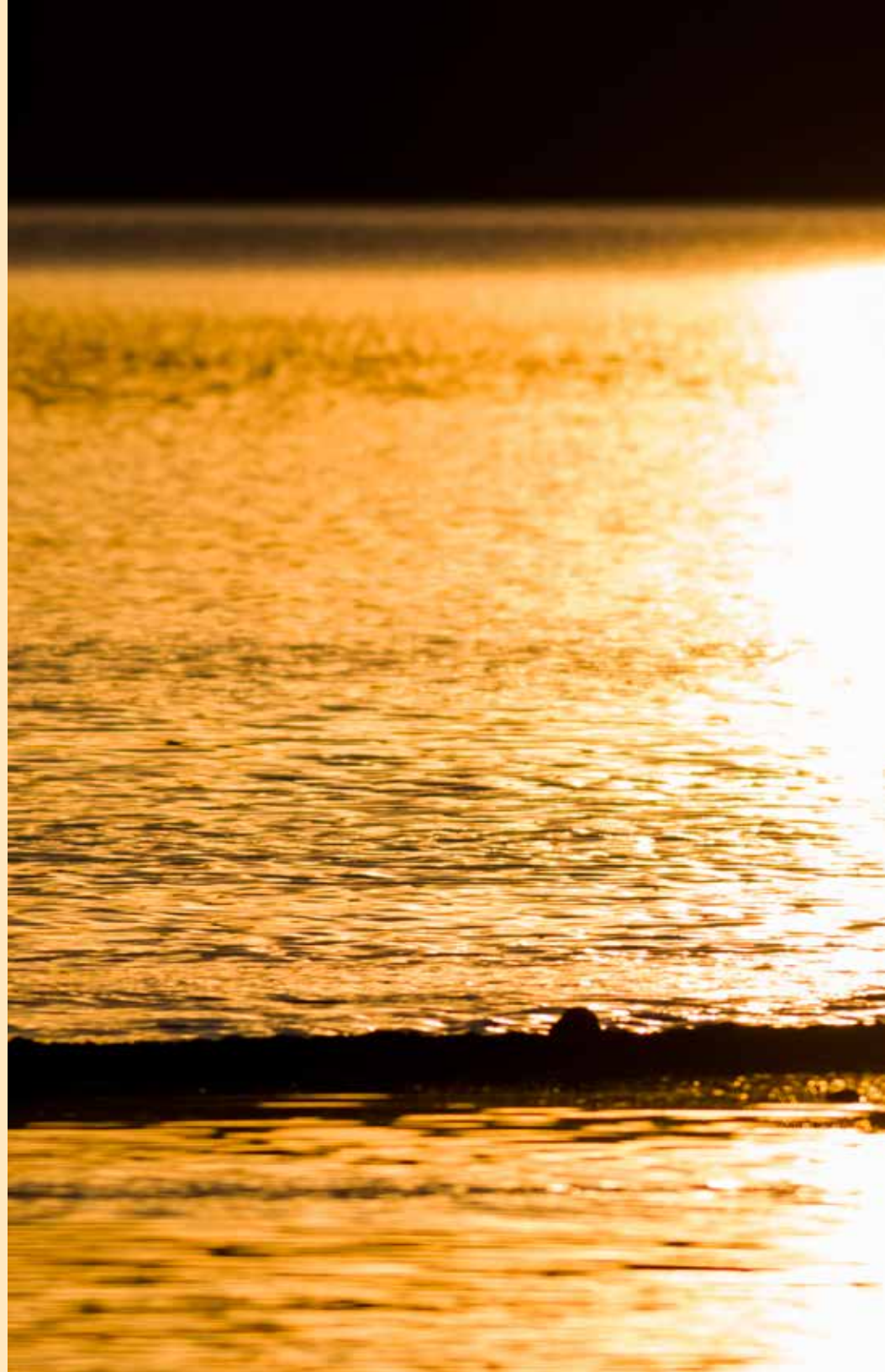
Mother bears are very protective of their cubs. If they sense danger, they will huff at their cubs, urging them to climb trees for safety. Unlike the big and heavy adult bears, cubs can **climb trees** because of their light weight, agility, and sharp claws.





Ready For a Swim?

At dawn, a coastal brown bear mother is ready to wade and swim through the water in search of salmon. Her **cubs swim** behind her, observing where and how their mother fishes. The cubs stay with their mother for two to three years learning **important hunting skills**.









Got One!

Brown bears are strong swimmers and highly skilled at catching salmon. They have good vision and can recognize different colors. Bears can **spot fish underwater** with their brown eyes. Sometimes they stand upright, like a human, looking for fish. They can clearly see a school of red salmon swimming through a glassy river.

A mother bear ducks underwater and snatches a big red salmon with her powerful jaws. After she tears apart the fish with her **sharp teeth and claws**, she shares it with her hungry cubs.







Salmon and Bears

At Brooks Falls in Katmai National Park, brown bears **catch salmon** in different ways. Some bears perch themselves on top of the falls, patiently waiting for a fish to rocket up from the water. Other bears lunge, dive, and catch salmon with their paws, claws, and snapping jaws. Some bears chase fish into shallow areas and pounce on them. Younger bears wait on the sidelines, watching older bears fish in their favorite spots.

As many as seventy bears **feed on the salmon** in Brooks River, one of the highest concentrations of brown bears on earth.





Whose Fishing Hole?

After waiting for nearly an hour, an experienced brown bear quickly snatches a jumping salmon with its sharp teeth. As the bear walks off with his prize, two other bears begin **fighting over territory**. The stronger, dominant bear roars and snaps at the challenging bear. The smaller bear soon backs off, and the dominant bear returns to a favorite fishing spot.

During the peak of a salmon run, brown bears can consume as much as **ninety pounds of fish in a day**. This is equivalent to a bear eating about 162 cheeseburgers! Salmon are high in protein and rich with oil. This important food helps the bears **build their fat reserves** for the long winter. Some bears double their body weight prior to hibernation.

Rub a Dub Cub

During the warm summer months, bears **shed their winter fur coats**. They also scratch and rub their bodies to leave their scent and will commonly use trees as rubbing posts. If there are no trees available, bears sometimes rub their shoulders on signposts.

Grizzly bears have powerful shoulders. Their muscles allow them to burst with speed for short periods of time. Bears have been known to **run up to thirty-five miles per hour!** One bear in Denali National Park was clocked at a record speed of forty-one miles per hour, but the rangers didn't give him a ticket.







Buckets of Berries

In late summer, the tundra and mountain slopes gradually turn to shades of crimson, yellow, and gold. Berries ripen across Alaska. Grizzly and brown bears have **special lips that are well adapted** for combing berries off the bushes. Their large, supple lips extend away from their teeth so they can easily rake and scoop the berries into their mouths.

Coastal brown bears love to feast on salmonberries, elderberries, highbush cranberries, and blueberries.

In Interior Alaska and the Arctic, grizzly bears also **eat a variety of ripe, sugary berries**. Some of their favorites include blueberries, soapberries, crowberries, and cranberries. When people pick berries, they have to be careful not to surprise a bear that might be thrashing through the bushes nearby.





Feast and Sleep

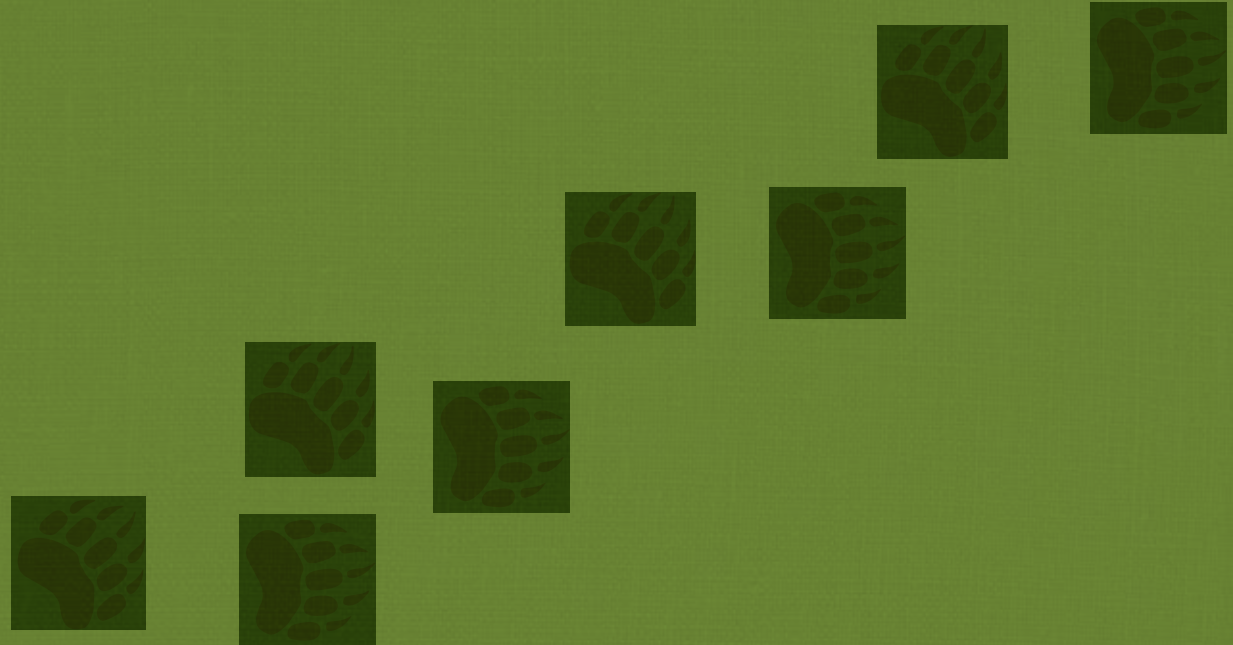
After a big meal of salmon and berries, it's time to rest. Bears like to **dig out day beds** or belly pits. Some bears choose shaded areas in the soft, mossy forest. They roll on their backs and **stretch their paws** towards the sky. Other times, they drop their full bellies into a shallow pit and lie face down to digest their food.





A mother bear can become a perfect pillow for a sleepy cub.



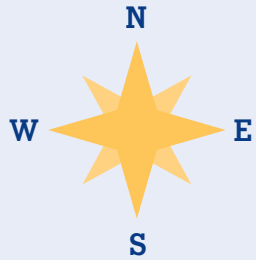


Wild and Free

Alaska offers a special wilderness home for more than **30,000 grizzly and brown bears**. Many other animals such as black bears, wolves, caribou, moose, and Dall sheep depend on Alaska's wild, open spaces to live healthy lives.

Visitors come from all over the world to see the beauty of Alaska's wilderness and its great diversity of animals. If we protect places like **Denali National Park** and **Katmai National Park**, these magnificent bears will continue to thrive, wild and free, for many years to come.

Alaska





Alaska is also the home of other bear species, such as the black bear and the polar bear. Combined with the brown bear, it is the only state where all three species of bears in North America are found.



for Tom Champion

Thanks for your passion to protect Alaska's wilderness for the bears and other creatures that share this great land.



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