

## **TIPS FROM THE POSSE: Polar bears — cute, Christmas-y and dangerous**



Many folks associate polar bears with Christmas, partly because of their snowy white fur and that they live in the polar regions where Santa Claus hails from. Their Christmas association has also been promoted by mass marketing campaigns, such as the bear drinking a Coca-Cola, or holiday classics like *The Santa Clause* movie where a polar bear is directing traffic at the North Pole.

There was of course, the Tolkien story about the polar bear that lived with Father Christmas at the North Pole. Father Christmas noted the bear was helpful, but caused a lot of accidents. If I recall correctly, the polar bear wound up in the preverbal doghouse for breaking the North Pole while he was trying to climb it. In the real world, polar bears are not only dangerous, but they can also be dangerous man eaters.

Every time we head off into the woods, there is a certain element of danger that goes along with you. Take a wrong step, and you fall down a tallis slope, slip while crossing a river, and you drown, fish along a quiet mountain stream, and do a one-legger in a beaver hole. Hunting dangerous game, the kind of game that hunts back, brings the danger to all new levels.

When you mention dangerous game in North America, everyone thinks of grizzly bears, and sometimes the smaller cousin, the black bear. Looking at the numbers, the Griz and old black bear are rank amateurs in the dangerous category, compared to their polar cousin.

Of the 1 million black bears around the world, about 3 people a years are killed, and most of the black bear attacks involve a dog. As for the brown bears, which include the grizzly, there are some 300,000 of them worldwide. These brown bears kill around 20 people annually. However, Russia has a large population of brown bears, and one report claims that 10 Russians annually are killed by them.

This brings us to the polar bear, who is the largest and strongest of the bear species. They are not routinely maneaters, but they are carnivores, and will attack a human if they feel threatened, or if they are hungry enough. Nutritionally stressed polar bears, particularly males, are the most dangerous to be around.

Statistically, you have an 11 times greater chance of getting attacked by brown bears versus polar bears. There is an estimated polar bear population between 22,000 and 31,000 individuals. These bears kill several humans a year, and attack numbers in the teens. One estimate claims 20 people have been killed in some 73 documented attacks. Keep in mind, they live on sea ice in the arctic and spend most of their time on ice floes. There aren't many people there, a smaller number of "targets" available, so to speak. On those ice floes, the view is completely unobstructed, so they can see you coming for a long ways off, and if they perceive you as a threat, better make sure the life insurance payments are current.

While the polar bear likely evolved between 343,000 and 479,000 years ago, he didn't get his Latin name until 1774, which is *Ursus maritimus*, meaning sea bear, as the locals still call him, because of his close association with the Arctic's cold waters and sea ice. It is believed he evolved from brown bears around 150,000 years ago as a subspecies. The Laplanders, from Northern Europe call him "God's Dog" or "Old Man in the Fur Cloak." They won't call him polar bear for fear of offending him.

The meal of choice for a polar bears are both ringed and bearded seals. The bear lives on the ice, and watches open leads and breathing holes for the seal to pop up in. They will take other prey when available, but not much else live on those sheets of ice. A bearded seal typically reaches 8 feet in length and might weigh in up to 800 pounds. Kind of gives you an idea about the size and strength of a polar bear.

Male polar bears can weigh as much as 1800 pounds, twice the weight of females, and can reach 12 feet in length. Not only are they the largest bear in the world, but they are also the

largest land carnivore on the planet. The largest known bear weighed in at just over 2200 pounds. That's a lot of polar bear.

The skin of a polar bear is actually black. Beneath all that thick fur, they have jet black skin. The bear's fur is translucent and only appears white because it reflects visible light.

Their sense of smell is their most amazing trait, as not only can they smell a source of food from almost a mile away, but they can also smell as deep as 3 feet below compacted snow. Instead of chasing after seals, polar bears use their sense of smell to find them underwater and then wait for them to pop back up.

For an animal weighing close to a short ton, a polar bear can still run across the ice at up to 20 mph, but swimming is where he really is an over achiever. As well as reaching 6 mph in the water, and can swim for many hours, and sometimes days, to get from one piece of ice to another. Their large paws are adapted for swimming, which they'll use to paddle through the water while holding their hind legs flat like a rudder.

Although they evolved from brown bears, they don't hibernate. During the winter, when sea ice forms, it's the perfect time for them to hunt seals. Polar bears do well in their environment, because in the wild, they can reach 25 years old, similar to brown bears.

It is interesting to note that the vast majority of polar bear attacks are not fatal to the human, which tells me they just don't want us invading their territory. It was also interesting that most attacks occur during December. Science says it is because December is when there is the least amount of ice, but I think they might not like Christmas. My wife has a collection of stuffed animals she spreads around the house at Christmas time. I notice that several of them are polar bears. I better keep an eye on them this December.

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