A Year in the Life of a Grizzly Bear

Summary

Students learn about seasonal variations in the life of a grizzly bear.

Procedure

Reading and Discussion

Hand out and read out loud the illustrated narrative *The Grizzlies’ First Year*, which describes a year in the life of a grizzly bear mother and her cubs. After completing the story discuss the following questions with the class.

- What do grizzly bears do from December through March?
- When do grizzly bears give birth to their cubs?
- How big are the cubs when they are born?
- How big are the cubs when they leave the den in the spring?
- What do grizzlies eat?
- What does the mother grizzly teach her cubs?
- Where does the grizzly bear dig its den and during what season?
- Describe what you might see if you found a grizzly bear den.
- How big are the cubs when they are nine months old?
- How long do the cubs stay with their mother?
- How does the grizzly stay warm during the winter?

Mural or Diorama

Divide the class into four groups and assign each group one season: winter, spring, summer or fall. Each group should then design a mural depicting what the grizzly bear does and where it lives during each season. Write the corresponding season at the top of each mural. Encourage your students to show through the illustration what the grizzly eats, how it gets its food, what the grizzly mother teaches her cubs, and what a grizzly den might look like. When completed, you may choose to combine the seasonal murals into one diorama to be displayed along a wall of the classroom or hallway.

Resources


The Grizzlies' First Year

By Melissa A. Madsen

It was early April and tender blades of grass poked through the melting snow. Gilley the Grizzly and her two cubs, Jesse and Berry, crawled out of their den after several months of winter sleep. Gilley yawned and then stretched her paws against the damp ground. Her large black nose twitched as she sniffed the warm breeze. The air was filled with the scent of spring.

Jesse and Berry playfully stumbled and rolled on the ground, learning to crawl in and out of the den. They were careful to stay close to the den, where they could hide if a larger animal came near.

The entrance to their den is a base of a tree. The tree’s roots make the entrance strong. Last November, Gilley dug the den into the slope behind the tree, creating a thick roof over the sleeping area. The sleeping area of the den is higher than the entrance, keeping warm air inside.

Jesse and Berry were born in January. At birth, each cub weighed a pound and was about 10 inches long. For three months they slept beside their mother inside the den, occasionally nursing on her rich milk. The cubs are bigger now, weighing 5 to 10 pounds. By the end of the summer they will weigh 40 to 90 pounds.

Gilley watched her cubs play. “It’s time for them to learn how to find their own food,” she thought. She wanted her cubs to know how to manage on their own. Besides, all cubs learn to hunt during their first spring and summer. Gilley called to Jesse and Berry and led them down the mountain to the green river valley.

Young cubs learn from their mothers’ examples. Jesse and Berry eagerly watched Gilley as she began pawing under vegetation and rocks in search of crisp roots. She held her nose close to the ground and sniffed. She stopped where she found the strongest scent. Then she broke the soil with her long, sharp claws and sifted the dirt away from a root.
Nearby, the cubs practiced sniffing the ground and digging roots. Jesse caught his long claw underneath a root. Gilley patiently showed him how to pull the root loose from the ground. Determined to dig out his own root, he sniffed the ground and followed a scent. He stopped and started digging where the scent was strongest. The moment his claw moved the soil, a ground squirrel peeped at Jesse through the hole. Startled to see Jesse, it quickly pulled its head inside the hole. Jesse's digging claws followed. After digging eleven holes searching for the squirrel, the cub stopped, thoroughly exhausted.

“You’ll get it next time, Jesse,” Gilley said. “Squirrels are fast. With practice, you’ll know where to dig the next hole.”

By June, the cubs were skilled root diggers and squirrel catchers. “It’s time for them to learn how to swim,” Gilley thought.

So she led the way across the woods into the river. At first the cubs only put their paws into the water. But when one cub went deeper, the other followed. Soon the cubs splashed and rolled in the crystal clear river.

After the cubs were used to swimming, Gilley waded into the rushing water to teach them how to fish. She looked into still pools of water behind large rocks until she spotted a fish. Then, she quickly dunked her paw into the river and swept out a fish. “That’s all there is to it,” she said. “Now, you try, Berry.”

Berry watched the cold water rush past a log on shore. She could almost taste the fish, but she had to catch one first. The rocks in the water were shiny and slick. Berry waded a few feet from the rocky shore, carefully placing each paw on the slick rocks below. Rushing water pushed against her small, strong legs. She stopped in a calm pool and looked into the water. Just below the surface was a fish. Swoop! Her paw scooped the fish out of the water and on to the shore. Jesse was eagerly waiting on the river bank. He sniffed the fish with surprise and then ate it.

The rest of the summer the bears ate squirrels, mice, voles, fish and plants. But as fall began, they fed on wild berries and nuts. Gilley knew they would need
a hefty fat supply to nourish them through their winter sleep. Watching her cubs eat huckleberries, blueberries and nuts, Gilley thought about the oncoming winter.

“We will need a bigger den this year. But for now, the cubs will play, eat and hunt. Cubs grow up too fast. When they are two years old, they will be on their own,” she thought as she watched her cubs wrestle in the grass.

In early November, the weather got colder. Gilley led her cubs up into the high country in search of a den site. She chose a site near last year’s, on a north-facing slope. It was above 6,500 feet, high enough to ensure a deep snow cover throughout the winter.

After finding a tree stump with plenty of roots, she began digging. She dug and dug and dug. After creating a large enough hole, Gilley searched for materials to line the den floor. She used evergreen boughs, mosses and grasses. Gilley carefully placed the materials on the floor of the den. A week later the den was completed.

By mid-November a blizzard surrounded the mountaintop. It was time for the bears to go inside their den and begin their winter sleep. One by one, Jesse, Berry and Gilley nestled themselves into the warm sleeping area. As they slept, their hearts beat slower, their body temperatures dropped 9 degrees and yet they stayed warm. Outside, the ground was covered with snow and the river was frozen. The bears would sleep in their warm den until the snow melted in the spring.