

Winter Sleepers

Written for The Western Home Monthly by H. Mortimer Batten

When winter comes, many of the wild kindred of the woods find that their food supply is cut short, and thus they are forced to face one of two alternatives. Unable to survive the cold and desolation of winter in their summer quarters, many of them migrate to far off regions where the conditions of life are more favorable, while others curl themselves in some sheltered nook or corner, and spend the months of famine comfortably sleeping.

For those who sleep away the winter, like the bears, the badgers, the squirrels, and the dormice, nature has made ample provisions. Some wild animals, indeed, have sense enough to store away a little food to keep them going through their winter sleep, and during our springtime rambles through the woods we often find the winter beds of squirrels, the litter of nut shells about the threshold betraying their whereabouts. If we examine the nest, the few nuts remaining in it that the squirrel has not cracked are sure to be bad ones, for the squirrel, being an authority on nuts, never wastes his time cracking those that will not repay his trouble. But really the squirrel is not a true winter sleeper like the others I have mentioned, for he is up and about with the first gleam of sunshine that peers through the clouds.

Fall is a time of plenty for all the winter sleepers. For the squirrel nuts abound; the bears fatten themselves up on the berry crops; the badgers have no difficulty in catching the young mice, trembling in the grass; the dormice have not far to go in search of seeds and grain. Thus while autumn lasts they are able to secrete sufficient fat to keep them going through the period of sleep, for during this period they require little nourishment, as all the functions of the body almost cease. Thus the bear lounges into his winter quarters fat and sleek, but when he comes out months later he is thin and desperately hungry.

It must not be imagined, however, that the drowsiness which comes over these animals as winter draws near cannot be avoided. They sleep because it is their only way of surviving the winter. When kept in captivity and fed regularly they do not hibernate. Neither would they do so in a wild state if it were unnecessary. They would rather pursue their daily affairs out in the open, and should the winter be mild they take advantage of it by continuing their liberty.

The bear, becoming morose and restless with age, dispenses with his winter sleep altogether, and during the months of famine he roams the woods, a demon of ravenous ill-temper. And when one meets a bear it all depends on what time of the year it is as to how he will act. A winter grizzly is likely to be a very awkward customer which the Indians invariably give a wide berth.

Sometimes, too, a bear will rouse from his winter sleep while the snow is still on the ground and game scarce, and it is just at this time of the year when most of the bear tragedies occur at outlying lumber camps. Only a few years ago at the Red River lumber camp two brothers were out for a stroll in the very early spring when they noticed a bear on the opposite bank. It was only a black bear, and both the men had seen scores of black bears before and had invariably found them to be one of the most timorous of woodland creatures. They did not think that this bear had just awakened from his winter sleep, ravenously hungry, to find game scarce, and ere they had time to realize what was happening the bear had plunged into the river and was swimming towards them. It followed them back to camp, where the cook, armed with an automatic pistol, ran to their rescue. He, too, underestimated the ferocity of that springtime bear, and ere he could step aside the brute smashed in his skull with one tremendous blow.

That "there is never any telling what a bear will do" is an old backwoods adage, but, as I have already said, his conduct all depends on the time of year you meet him.

Most winter sleepers give birth to their young during the period of hibernation, and by the time the thawing spring comes the cubs have their eyes open, and are strong enough to accom-

pany their mothers out into the world. A friend of mine once saw a mother black bear and her two cubs who had evidently just emerged from their winter den. The mother was so thin that her coat hung upon her like ill-fitting clothing, and as she hurried along she kept pausing to gulp down great mouthfuls of snow.

What an unsatisfactory meal for the great half-starved mother, and what a lean and desolate world the cubs must have thought she had brought them into!

Fall is the time to take the census of the woods, when the crisp brown leaves betray the whereabouts of the woodland people, and one bright fall evening in

England I was sitting in a wood, listening, when a loud rustling on the bank above betrayed the whereabouts of Mr. Hedgehog. Next minute he came into view, rolling down the bank head over heels almost to my feet. He may have done it just for fun, but anyway he had collected a beautiful overcoat of leaves which would keep him warm during his winter sleep by the time he reached the bottom.

Away in the lonely Yukon I have known men to sleep away the months of deadly cold and darkness. This may sound rather tall, but just imagine yourselves shut up in a tiny shanty for weeks of eternal night. One old Scotchman whom I knew spent days on end in a semi-torpid condition, and he told me he could do with very little food during the winter months, while the Indians of the barren lands often sleep days on end under the snow with no food at all. In the intense cold of these northern regions we find it easy to sleep, and perhaps—who can say?—this is a relic of by-gone ages when man himself sought out the hollow oak when winter came, and spent the months of famine in peaceful slumber!

Finnegan—Oh, yes, Oi can understand how thim astronomers can calkilate th' distance av a stharr, its weight, dinsity and color, and all thot—but th' thing thot gets me is, how th' divvle do they know its name?



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