







All About Polar Bear Moms & Cubs

A female polar bear usually gives birth to two cubs.


 Though mating takes place in April or May, the fertile ova are not implanted until the following Fall when the mother prepares to go into the den. (This process is known as delayed implantation.)

Sometimes, depending on the female's health, she may have only one or even three cubs. Three are hard to care for.


A female polar bear digs a maternity den in a snow bank in the Fall.

 She gives birth to her cubs about two months after she enters the den. Newborns are 12 to 14 inches long and weigh little more than a pound. They are covered with fine white hair.


A female polar bear's rich milk helps cubs grow quickly.

 By the time the family leaves the den in March, the cubs have thick fur and weigh 25 to 30 pounds.


For at least 20 months, polar bear cubs drink their mother's milk and depend on her for survival.

 The mother's success at hunting seals directly influences the cubs' own health and well-being.


Polar bear cubs learn to hunt by watching their mother.

 They must learn to wait patiently for a seal to return to its breathing hole.

Orphaned cubs are usually unable to survive in the harsh environment of the Arctic.

 Cubs rely on the tutoring they get from their moms during their first two to three years. They learn how to hunt seals successfully by developing patience and stealth, and they also learn how to avoid danger.


Females with cubs try to avoid adult male bears, which sometimes attack the young.

 Highly protective mother bears are capable of driving off much larger males.


The world's densest concentration of polar bear birth dens lies on Russia's Wrangel and Herald islands.

 Each year, 350 to 500 pregnant polar bears den on the islands.


Females in the Low Arctic wean their cubs as they approach their second birthday.

 Those in the High Arctic, where conditions are more demanding, care for their cubs an additional year. Young bears are considered "sub-adults" until they reach maturity at age 5 or 6.

Biologists believe that starvation is the leading cause of death for sub-adult bears.

 Those polar bears that manage to survive to adulthood have learned to master the challenges of Arctic life.

In the wild, adult polar bears live an average of 15 to 18 years.

 However, biologists have tagged a few bears in their early 30s. In zoos, polar bears may live until their mid-to-late 30s.

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