

Spanning the Gap

Winter Survival



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Spanning the Gap
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*"Summertime,
and the living is easy..."*,

So the song goes, but as winter approaches, hard times arrive for the furred, finned, feathered, and scaled creatures. The shorter days of late summer and early fall indicate that temperatures will soon be colder and food will soon be scarce...

Park wildlife exhibit a variety of adaptations to the harsh season: some animals move to areas with a mild climate, some stay and sleep through the winter, some stay and remain active throughout the winter.

If you are lucky enough to have wings, you can fly to the milder climes of the south to wait out winter.

Migration is the regular, extensive, seasonal movements of animals between their breeding regions and their wintering regions. Not only birds, but some butterflies, fish, and bats are also migratory. Migration works especially well for birds because their high metabolism requires unending source of rich food. Flying south may sound easy, but the trip is often very arduous and hardship takes its toll. The migratory birds' use of similar habitats in

(Left) Who-ooo cares it's cold? Owls can feast on other wintering animals such as grouse and rabbits.



Start a family! Some owls may breed and nest in January.



Migrate: After enjoying the summer sunshine at Smithfield Beach in the recreation area, this Northern ("Baltimore") oriole can fly south to winter in the tropics. *(NPS photo by Warren Bielenberg)*

different parts of the world at different times of the year is one key to their survival, and a reminder of our *global* responsibility to maintain both the *breeding* and the *wintering* habitats of migratory populations.

For cold-blooded animals, **winter hibernation** is mandatory since they do not have the ability to raise their own body temperatures. As the temperature drops, their body temperature drops, and their metabolism slows. Snakes retreat to dens. Some frogs and turtles burrow in mud at the bottom of ponds. Some toads, turtles, and salamanders burrow underground for their "long winter's nap," which could last up to six months.

Some warm-blooded mammals also retreat into hibernation for the entire winter. Woodchucks and several species of bats live out the harsh winter in a state of "suspended animation" in which their pulse and respiration become so low, that they appear to be dead. In autumn, before hibernation, these mammals increase their food intake in order to build up a layer of fat on which to feed during their winter of inactivity. No food or water is consumed by the hibernating animals.

Other warm-blooded animals, such as bears, raccoons, skunks, and chipmunks, enter periods of **deep sleep** during the winter, but never attain the drastically low metabolism of true hibernating animals, and can be easily aroused. In fact, chipmunks, skunks, and raccoons can be seen foraging for food on warm winter days. A bear, on the other hand, also does not truly hibernate, but neither eats nor drinks during its winter sleep. Bears depend solely on their thick layer of fat to keep themselves nourished, as well as the cubs that females give birth and nurse to during this winter dormancy.

Not all animals migrate or hibernate during the winter. Large numbers of animals **simply deal with winter** snow and cold, as humans do. A walk in the winter woods might scare up a crow, owl, pheasant,



Hibernate: It's sunny now, but the muddy bottom of Black's Pond on the Appalachian Trail may have to be home for this frog come winter also.



Mostly sleep it off: A warm day might bring out a few of the deep sleepers, such as the skunk who left these tracks.



Deal with it: A deer "run" reveals the route that a herd has taken.

grouse, or turkey. Tracks left by such winter inhabitants as deer, foxes, bobcats, weasels, otters, porcupines, rabbits, and squirrels are easily noticed in the snow. Identifying and following these *snow tracks* can give you a peek into the daily life of these animals.

What will *your* winter survival strategy be? Will you fly south? Will you hibernate by your fire with a good book? Or will you be active in the outdoors like a number of your fellow creatures?



Who's there? An experienced eye will recognize the track of a grouse landing in the snow.