

# Spring Hunt



Spring is a time of plenty for Churchill's polar bears. Ringed seals, the main diet of polar bears, are giving birth on the sea ice in March and April. Since the majority of ringed seals caught by polar bears are one year old or less, this is as good a time as any to fatten up.

There are two main hunting strategies employed by polar bears: still-hunting and stalking. Still-hunting is by far the most common. The still-hunt amounts to a big chess game out on the ice. Seals use a number of breathing holes, decreasing their chances of predation. The polar bear simply stakes out a seal breathing hole, lies down beside it, waits and hopes. The majority of still hunts last less than an hour but, that being said, polar bears are known for their patience and perseverance.

If a seal surfaces, the bear will either grab it with its powerful jaws or kill it with a crushing blow from its paw, dragging it from the water. Often, only the skin and fat of the seal is devoured. Highly digestible and high in fat and protein, it provides nutrition and hydration and is the mainstay of the polar bear diet. The other technique is stalking. With the warmer temperatures of

spring, seals haul out near a breathing hole and bask on the ice; periodically sleeping and waking up to scan for threats then dozing off again. A polar bear will attempt to time its approach with the seal's sleep patterns. As the bear makes its slow approach, it freezes periodically, remaining motionless while the seal is awake. When the seal once again closes its eyes, the approach begins again. Once the bear is close enough, likely within 30 metres (100'), it makes its final charge. If the seal cannot slip back through its breathing hole in time, then that's all, folks.

Occasionally, seal kills occur during Churchill's bear season. Seals sleep in the water and may become stranded in the vast tidal zone along Cape Churchill. Once locked in a tidal pool or trapped on a boulder, they have to wait up to twelve hours for the water to return. This is a might stressful and probably fatal.

After a kill has been made, other bears will approach, nose in the air, jogging in a zig zag pattern to hone in on the scent. Successful hunters usually try to devour as much seal as quickly as possible but once more bears have arrived, they may even share their meal, assuming the proper etiquette has been shown. In the following days, the successful hunter will continue to venture out to the tidal zone or patrol the coast on a regular basis trying to repeat their feat; just another example of their incredible learning capacity.



## Bear Facts:

### *Hunting Adaptations*

Polar bears are opportunistic hunters. They have been recorded stalking caribou, raiding eider duck colonies, catching geese from underneath the water and even taking a passing swipe at a snowy owl, raven or snow bunting.

Individual bears can adapt hunting strategies in a wide variety of ways. One interesting adaptation is the ice floe impersonation. A polar bear will swim/float within striking distance of a seal or even beluga whale. Bears have been witnessed exhibiting this behaviour in the Churchill River!

During Churchill's bear season, you can watch bears learn how to hunt...tourists. In 2005, one bear, nicknamed Number One (pictured on page 20), learned to use the handle on the side of the Tundra Vehicles as added leverage to get just that much closer to a free lunch. Over the years, there have been bears who have learned to open doors, slide windows, climb on tires - luckily, we are too skinny for most bears to put forth that much effort.

Inuit hunters have told stories crediting bears with a variety of adaptations, including covering their black nose with their paw while stalking or even using large ice blocks to kill walrus. While these stories have not been scientifically confirmed, the bears' intelligence and resourcefulness should not be underestimated. Of course, I tend to take the word of people that used to hunt bears with a sharpened 3' long stick even if it has not been proven.

Anyone who has spent time around polar bears knows that they are always watching and learning and waiting. Often, they seemingly nonchalantly assess a situation and retreat, only to come back under cover of darkness and enact their plan. Regardless, it is quite clear that many bears learn after only one repetition. This combined with their curiosity makes life in polar bear country quite interesting.

