

HIBERNATION

Both Animals & Plants Take a Break in Winter!

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Animals

WHY DO OUR ANIMAL FRIENDS HIBERNATE?

Finding food and staying warm can be a challenge in our part of the continent's winter season. Hibernation is a sleep-like state that animals enter to help them get through the cold months. To prepare for their long rest, animals that hibernate eat lots during the fall to put on body weight. They can then live off their fat stores so they don't have to eat for months. Before they enter hibernation, they find a cozy and safe den where they will spend the winter. Next, they settle down; their body temperature and heart rate drop significantly and they go into a deep sleep.

Many different species employ this strategy to get through the cold winter months when food is scarce. Rodents such as chipmunks and ground squirrels hibernate, as do bats. Amphibians, including frogs and salamanders, settle down at the bottoms of ponds and streams where they can survive almost freezing temperatures. The biggest and most famous animal that sleeps through the winter is the bear.

Plants

HOW DO OUR PLANT FRIENDS BECOME DORMANT?

Plants get their energy from the sun; as you go farther North in the winter, sunlight becomes very scarce, with only a few hours of strong light every day. This means plants can't generate as much energy as they need to grow, so they enter a state of dormancy to preserve their resources in the winter.



Feelin' a little tired at this time of year? Perhaps it's your natural response to the seasonal shift towards shorter days. Our human response isn't too different from the biological responses of plants and animals, leading all of us to rest and restore through this colder, darker winter season. Whether it's hibernation, dormancy, or just slowing down, many creatures use the wintertime as a chance to take a break.

Small plants may appear to die at the end of fall, but this is an illusion. The part of the plant above the surface of the ground will wither but the roots stay alive underground, ready to grow a new stem and leaves in the spring. Deciduous trees lose their leaves and stay alive, living off their stored sugars without growing. Coniferous (evergreen) trees, which usually have needles instead of leaves, stay green all year round and are photosynthesizing, but still grow less during the winter.

Dormancy is the reason you can tell a tree's age by counting the rings in the trunk. In the spring and summer, the tree grows rapidly, which leaves behind a large ring of lighter-coloured wood. In the fall and winter—when the tree is dormant—the wood hardens and becomes darker, each year leaving the thin rings that you count.

People

WHAT IT MEANS FOR PEOPLE

Although we don't hibernate or go dormant, winter is a good time for us to slow down and take a break. The short days and cold weather often make people tired; instead of fighting the feeling, focus on relaxing and recharging as the year comes to an end.

Let's not forget that there's a Nature celebration to acknowledge—Winter Solstice, and it falls on December 21, the shortest day of the year. Across the globe, it's observed by bringing light (often in the form of candles or campfires) into the darkness and sharing time with loved ones to remind us of joy—even at the coldest time of the year.

This winter, take time to rest and reflect; listen to your body when you feel tired. When the days are short and the nights are cold, every creature can benefit from snuggling up in their den to take a break. •



Things to do IN WINTER

- » Search for books about bears and nestle in for story time together
- » Research what foods are sources of vitamin D (the sunshine vitamin) and enjoy a weekly cooking time with the children
- » Get those warm outer layers on, courageously invite the kids out, and try your hand at building outdoor shelters in the forest or the park

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For references visit ecoparent.ca/EXTRAS/WIN22

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