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Fright sight: Polar bears and Kodiak bears can weigh 1,500 pounds and stand 10 feet tall.

Is an average bear more intelligent than most humans? The animals are showing not just fearlessness but great ingenuity as they venture more frequently into human territory.

The Canadian town of Churchill celebrates Halloween like nowhere else in the world. As night falls, people with guns patrol the town in pickup trucks. They are all there to protect trick-or-treating children — from bears.

Churchill is known as “the polar bear capital of the world”. It was built on the route bears take to **Hudson Bay** when the waters freeze in the autumn. Hundreds go past it — or through it — each year.

Many tourists come to watch. The bears, meanwhile, are spending more time on land as climate change makes the ice melt earlier in the year.

This, and growing familiarity with humans, has made them an increasing threat. So much so that Churchill now has a polar-bear jail.

Bears which cannot be scared away are held in the jail for up to 30 days. They are then taken by helicopter to be released 90 miles away.

Last August, bears roamed another Canadian town, Yellowknife, after the people fled wildfires. Around the world, such stories are becoming more common.

In 2019, a village in northern Russia was invaded by more than 50 bears.

In 2022 **Connecticut** recorded 67 cases of bears breaking into homes. A man in Romania complained that a bear had drunk all his whisky.

Experts say that we should not be surprised. Bears are thought to be among the most intelligent animals:¹ as clever as apes and monkeys and cleverer than dogs.

They have the largest brains, relative to their size, of any land **mammal**. They are very clever at hiding from hunters, sometimes using trees and rocks as camouflage.

They have also been known to open many kinds of supposedly bear-proof containers.

They can find their way around large areas and never lose track of each other. Cubs spend up to three and a half years being taught by their mothers where to find food.

Is an average bear more intelligent than most humans?

Brainy bruises

Yes: Bears carry a detailed map of their territory in their heads and can remember food sources for as long as 10 years. Meanwhile humans, stupefied by social media and TV, are getting less intelligent.

No: Biologists credit them with an **IQ** equivalent to that of the great apes, but in human terms that only makes them as clever as a three-year-old child. Their jailbreak record is poor compared to humans’.

Or... Even if they are not cleverer than us, we can learn a great deal from them. They show tremendous patience when hunting and conserve their energy and resources by hibernating.

1. According to PBS.

Some people say

“We talk of wild animals, but the wildest animal is man.”

GK Chesterton (1874 – 1936), English writer

“The life of a wild animal always has a tragic end.”

Ernest Thompson Seton (1860 – 1946), Canadian-American writer

Empty heading

What do you think?

Six steps to discovery

1. Connect

How do you feel about this story? - Would you like to meet a bear? Do you worry about the ones in jail?

2. Wonder

What questions do you have? - For example: How many kinds of bear are there? Which are the most dangerous?

3. Reflect

What might happen next? - Imagine that a bear comes into your school. Write a diary entry about it.

Glossary

Hudson Bay - An inland sea on the eastern coast of Canada, connected to the Atlantic Ocean.

Connecticut - A state in the northeastern USA.

Mammal - A warm-blooded animal where mothers feed young using their own bodies.

IQ - A means of measuring human intelligence. A person’s IQ is usually ascertained by making them sit a standardised test. Some have criticised these tests as a means of evaluating intelligence, claiming that they ignore much of what it means to be intelligent.