



Lake Erie Nature & Science Center

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How Does Wildlife Cope With the Cold?

Do you ever wonder what Wildlife is doing in the middle of winter when we might be bundled up under a quilt in front of the fireplace sipping hot chocolate? Animals, of course, don't have quilts, fireplaces or hot cocoa. They are simply stuck outside! It's not as bad as you might think though, because wild animals are built to handle such harsh conditions.

There are generally four different ways that wild animals cope with the cold. They migrate, hibernate, undergo dormancy or simply deal with it.



Migraters do what appeals to some humans. When the weather turns cold, they simply head south to a warmer place. Many birds, including almost all of the insect eaters (woodpeckers being one of the exceptions), follow this strategy. Among our few mammal migraters are some Ohio bats which fly down to the Southern US and Central America to find warmer climes. While this strategy may seem appealing, most migraters must spend a lot of energy traveling back and forth twice a year.

Hibernators may have the best of both worlds. Instead of spending lots of energy traveling, they simply shut their bodies down and don't "wake up" until spring. Woodchucks, turtles, snakes and some bats are our common hibernators. While in hibernation, woodchucks will drop their body temp into the low 40s and take one breath every 6 minutes! Painted Turtles will burrow into the mud underwater and stay submerged for up to 5 months. They stay alive by absorbing tiny amounts of oxygen from the mud through their skin.

Dormancy is what most of our Ohio mammals do when the weather gets rough. Dormancy is a series of mini hibernations where the animal can den up for many days during the worst parts of winter but "wake up" and forage for food during the mild breaks throughout winter. Squirrels, skunks, raccoons, and even bears (not true hibernators!) use this strategy.

To simply deal with winter, animals are almost always equipped with special adaptations which allow them to survive harsh conditions. White-tailed Deer grow a special coat, made of very thick and hollow hairs, which provides excellent insulation. Red Fox will grow a very thick undercoat of fur, also providing plentiful insulation. Kestrels, which normally eat insects and a few small mammals and birds, begin to exclusively hunt small birds to make it through the winter.



So, rest assured that even though a January blizzard seems brutally harsh to us, that's only because we humans are not built to be out in the elements. Wildlife, on the other hand, is well-adapted and they don't need our concern, but our respect and awe!