

Winter Wonderland Animal Homes



Wisconsin's Winter Warriors:

Not all animals hibernate. Some must battle through winter like the toughest of troopers. These are animals that deserve respect from all of those who hide-away in the comfort of man-made homes, while they battle the -30 nights, freezing rain, blankets of snow, and bone-chilling winds. Each year they enter winter with no guarantee of survival till spring. They build their winter homes as best they can to keep safe from the grisly winter weather. Let's take a look at a few of Wisconsin's toughest winter warriors and the homes they construct. Many of these species can be seen right here in the park during the winter months.

White tail Deer



During the winter deer generally keep to forests, preferring coniferous stands that provide shelter from the harsh elements. As herbivores, they graze on most available plant foods. Their stomachs allow them to digest a mixed diet, including leaves, twigs, fruits and nuts, grass, corn, alfalfa, and even lichens and other fungi. However, the winter kills off the majority of edible food for these animals so starvation is seen in years where winters are harsh and long. In some stands you can see

where deer attempted to strip trees of bark and twigs to avoid an empty stomach. A lot of deer rely on the corn we throw out to attract them to our yards. So if you start, don't stop during winter or you may be a source for their starvation.

Great Horned Owl



Here in North America, when much of the continent is battling ice, snow and bone-chilling cold, it may seem like a bad time of year for a bird to nest. But to the Great Horned Owl, winter is the ideal time to breed, nest, incubate eggs and rear young. These tough birds are one of the earliest to nest, breeding and nesting as early as January despite the frigid weather. Like other owls, they do not build their own nests and prefer to take over the abandoned homes of other species, including squirrels, ravens, herons and, especially, red-tailed hawks. In northern winter, owls may store uneaten prey, coming back later to thaw out a frozen carcass by "incubating" it.

Red Fox



Like a cat, the fox's thick tail aids its balance, but it has other uses as well. A fox uses its tail as a warm cover in cold weather. When not hunting, Red fox spend their time curled up under a brush pile, under shrubs or in a heavy thicket. They don't build a nest or den except in brutally cold weather, when their thick fur coat and warm, bushy tail aren't enough to keep them comfortable. If crucial they'll dig a den or, better yet, take over the abandoned den of a burrowing animal. They use their hearing almost exclusively to hunt in winter, listening for the sounds of mice and voles moving about under layers of snow, then pouncing like a cat, they deliver a piercing blow with their teeth to claim their meal. Recent research has revealed that they use the Earth's magnetic field to triangulate the location of hidden prey under the snow.

Coyote



Coyotes are very resourceful, especially in the winter months where they live in dens, but seldom dig their own. They look for a suitable space in rock crevices, caves, hollow logs, another animal's abandoned den, or even thickets. In urban areas, they may den in old sheds or large drainpipes. Fast runners (up to 40MPH) coyotes hunt by day or night and usually alone. In the winter when food is scarce, an entire family will take down an animal. Their main diet in urban areas is rodents, ground squirrels, rabbits, fish, fruit, vegetables, insects and carrion. A thirsty coyote will drink from any source available, swimming pools, sprinklers, fountains, dog water dishes, birdbaths or even leaking hoses.

Bobcat



In the winter bobcats use various types of dens for shelter, each bobcat may have several, one main den and several auxiliary (supporting) dens, in its territory. **Main den:** Usually a cave or rock shelter, hollow log, fallen tree, or some other protected place. **Auxiliary dens:** Located in less-visited portions of the home range and are often brush piles, rock ledges or stumps. Bobcats mainly hunt rabbits and hares but are also known to eat rodents, birds, bats and even adult deer, which they usually consume during the winter months, as well as lamb, poultry and young pigs when a farm is near. In Wisconsin bobcat habitat varies from forests to brush land. A habitat dense with vegetation and lots of prey is ideal. They are excellent hunters, stalking prey with stealth and patience, and then capturing their meals with one great leap.

Turkey



One of the few birds to stay behind for winter, turkeys rely on coniferous forests to keep them sheltered from the cold of winter, roosting in pine trees at night to protect them from hungry winter predators. Like deer, domesticated turkeys may become reliant on corn thrown out in your backyard. So if you start don't stop. As wild turkeys preferred diet is scarce in the winter just like a deer's, you will often still see them in farm fields throughout the winter foraging for remaining scraps from the harvest season. They also eat winter, nuts, fruits and grains to stay satisfied.

Fisher



These animals are very elusive and not often seen. So seeing one in the winter is a rare and exciting experience. Fishers eat snowshoe hares, rabbits, rodents and birds, and are one of the few specialized predators of porcupines. Fishers are effective hunters, but are also known to eat insects, nuts, and berries when prey is not available. Fishers require large areas of dense mature coniferous or mixed forest and are solitary animals. In the winter they will travel many miles in search of prey and proper cover, seeking shelter in hollow trees, logs, rock crevices, and dens of other animals. Their extremely thick fur helps to keep them warm as they travel in the cold weather.

Otter



River otters take on winter the old-fashioned way—with a thick coat and gritty determination. Their two-layered fur coat allows them to stay active throughout winter. Outer hairs provide water repellency, and soft, dense under fur insulates them for adventures in and out of frigid water. They make their homes close to water—usually in burrows along the edges of rivers, lakes, or wetlands. In winter they are more diurnal (active during the day), while they are more nocturnal in other seasons. During the winter day, when temperatures are highest, they'll travel to open bodies of water where they can fish. When fish aren't readily accessible, they'll dig out hibernating frogs and turtles buried in the mud. While snow and ice may slow us down, neither pose a problem for river otters, who don't need sleds and skates to slide down snowy hills and across frozen ponds with ease.



^Otter tracks and slides on purple Trout Brook Trail

Beaver



Beavers live in shelters called lodges all year round. Beavers start working on bulking up their lodges in the fall. The lodges must be ready by winter to shelter them from hungry predators such as wolves, coyotes, fox and even otters. Lodges are usually cone shaped with underwater entrances. The beavers build from the inside out using mud, grass, and branches. Most predators find it too difficult to break through the complex arrangement of branches and mud so the beavers stay protected. It is rare to see a beaver out and about during winter. They spend the majority of winter inside their lodges. In the fall, before their ponds freeze, the beavers store food (fresh branches) in the water around their lodges. In the winter, a beaver will swim out of the lodge to get food under the ice. You can tell if beavers are inside a lodge by looking at the very top of the structure. In the winter, their breath and body heat will rise. This melts the snow at the top of the lodge.

Raccoon



Raccoons roam a large range at night as they search for food and, if food is scarce, may forage several square miles. Ahead of winter, they feed heavily to put on fat. They may lose up to half of it through the winter. When the weather is particularly brutal, the layers of fat enable them to spend long stretches of time in their dens, without eating. Their thick, insulating hair helps keep them warm, but a protective winter den is important to their survival. But being smart and adaptable, they've learned to survive even where there are few trees, by taking up residence in such places as storm drains, attics, chimneys, sheds, even nesting boxes! As we all know, Raccoons will eat anything to survive including garbage or pet food.

Make Your Own Winter Wonderland Home!

Now that we have seen how several different animal species survive the Wisconsin winter in their expertly designed homes, it's time for you to create your own using edible ingredients!! When you're all finished up, be sure to share what kind of home you made, how it functions and why you made it. Have fun!!

Materials We Used To Make Ours:

- White and chocolate frosting
- Marshmallows (big and small)
- Graham crackers
- Hershey's chocolate bars
- Pretzel sticks
- Snowflake candies
- Peanut Butter
- M&M's

- Rice Crispies
- Candy canes
- Licorice
- Sprinkles
- Dried Kool-Aid packets

