U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

What to Do if You Find a Dead Polar Bear

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) is the federal agency responsible for monitoring polar bear populations in the United States. As part of this effort, FWS biologists are working to obtain information on the condition and health of these animals. Recovering the carcass of a polar bear that has died recently of natural causes provides an important opportunity to aid in monitoring the health of polar bear populations. For example, a small tooth extracted from a polar bear skull allows scientists to estimate the animal's age, while marrow from a leg bone can be used to assess body condition and health.

We need your help. If you find a polar bear carcass or partial remains, please contact the FWS Marine Mammals Management Office in Anchorage at 1-800-362-5148. You will be asked to provide the following information about the animal, and, if possible, take photographs and collect the skull and femur (biggest front leg bone):

- Location where the carcass was found (GPS location, if possible)
- Estimated length, girth (circumference), and weight
- Sex and age class (cub of the year, yearling, sub-adult or adult)
- Body condition (see diagram on back)
- Presence of ear tags, collar, or other identifying features
- Possible cause of death (for example: open wounds, scars, broken bones)
- Estimated time of death (less than or more than 24 hours - see below)

It is especially valuable to biologists to quickly obtain samples from animals that are frozen or have died within 24 hours. If you find a polar bear that is frozen or has died within 24 hours, please call the FWS Marine Mammals Management office immediately. The FWS will arrange for samples to be shipped to Anchorage. The carcass is less than 24 hours old if:

- Carcass is intact and not scavenged
- Eyes are present and not wrinkled or shrunken
- No foul odor or dark brown/black fluid leaks from carcass
- Fur does not pull free in clumps when grasped
- No maggots or fly eggs are on or under the body

Thank you for your assistance. Your help in collecting this information is very much appreciated.

CRAIG PERHAM, USFWS

Scientists investigate a polar bear mother killed at her den site by an adult male polar bear.

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
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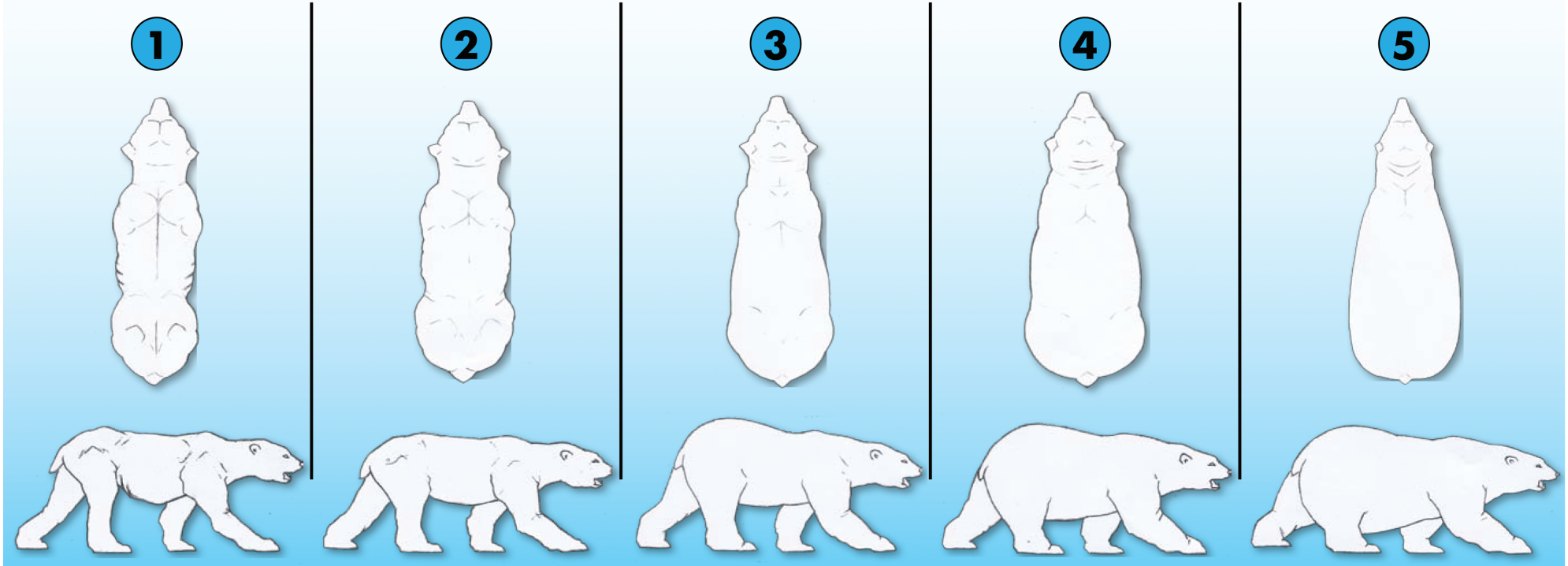
Visit the Marine Mammals home page:
http://alaska.fws.gov/polarbear

Polar Bear Score Card: A Standardized Fatness Index

Illustrations by Doug Lindstrand



1 SKINNY

Skinny emaciated appearance, vertebrae, ribs, and hip bones externally visible without palpation, no fat palpable between skin and muscle over the dorsal body, hips, or lower rump.

2 THIN

Thin, vertebrae and hip bones (but not ribs) partially visible, easily palpable under the skin, little/ no fat between skin and muscle over the back, small amounts of fat detectable on lower rump.

3 AVERAGE

Average healthy appearance, vertebrae / hip bones not visible, upper 1/3 to 1/2 of the spinal column can be felt under the skin, detectable layer of fat between skin and muscle over rear half of body, thickening slightly but detectably over lower rump.

4 FAT

Fat, vertebrae / hip bones not visible, palpation reveals fat deposited over upper vertebrae, hip bones difficult to feel through fat, fat thick over rump, a hand rubbed above the rump will initiate ripples in the skin over the fat layer.

5 VERY FAT

Obese, vertebrae /hip bones undetectable by palpation, thick layer of fat is apparent between skin and muscle 2/3 of the way up the back & over rump, a hand rubbed on lower back above rump sets off waves of rolling fat, possibly jiggling.

Condition: This is a subjective determination of bear's body condition based on assessment of body fat.