

Getting ready for winter

By: Corine Burgess

In Florida, we don't have the harsh winters that the northern states experience every year. But that doesn't mean that the Sunshine State doesn't hold plenty of challenges for the wildlife that resides here. Winter is a great time to be a human. We have it so easy compared to the animals. For most of us, there is no pressing need to hunt something down to feed ourselves and our children. We don't have to worry about being stocked and eaten and we don't have to be in a rush to build a home strong enough to endure the elements of the coming months.

In the wild, the fall months are the most challenging for wildlife. It is time for them to prepare for the coming low temperatures and scarcity of food. Green leaves and shoots that would normally be abundant, decrease and food is less easily obtained. When the plants lose their leaves and branches, it also depletes the amount of hiding places or shelter for critters to inhabit.

When temperatures drop, we, as humans, just turn up the heat and grab our heavy coats. But the critters don't have that option. Many animals do have ways of dealing with the cold though and some mammals grow new and thicker fur during the fall to keep them warm in the winter. Other creatures stay active in the cooler months and adapt to the changing weather with the ability to regulate their body temperatures.

Something that wildlife and many humans do have in common is putting on extra weight for the winter. Animals sometimes purposely eat heavily when food is abundant to store up fat in their bodies when it is needed for reserves in the winter when food is scarce. People eat for different reasons and then usually try to work off the extra pounds!

Many animals hibernate, or go into a deep sleep in the winter. Although Florida does not have an abundance of critters that hibernate, a few go through a very similar process. For example, the Florida Black Bear experiences "winter lethargy," which is a period of reduced activity when the bear sleeps more and doesn't require as much food. Snakes and other reptiles enter a state of brumation, which is described as a state of selective dormancy. The critter will still be active once in a while when it needs water, but it won't eat. Ladybugs spend the winter in a state of diapause, or a deep sleep. They fatten up in the fall and then hide in dark places, such as buildings or logs and sleep through the winter.

Some animals go dormant in the winter. Dormancy is kind of like hibernation because the animal is not active. Frogs, turtles and fish may seek warmth under rocks or logs. Some even bury themselves in the mud. Since cold water holds more oxygen than warm water, the creatures are able to breath by absorbing the air through their skin.

Some animals, such as squirrels and mice store up food for the winter. They gather extra food in the fall and put it away for later. Other animals like deer and rabbits spend the winter seeking out moss, bark, leaves and twigs to munch on. The sly fox simply changes its eating habits to fit the surrounding availability of food items. For example, in the spring, summer and fall it will munch on insects and fruit, but in the winter it will feast on small rodents since the other food is not usually available.

Shelter is necessary for everyone and many animals seek out holes in trees and logs. Others climb under rocks or make their cozy abode in the fallen leaves. Some even go underground for the winter months. To stay warm, many species, such as squirrels, will huddle up together and share the warmth of their bodies.

Many animals actually come to Florida for the winter to spend the coldest months in our warmer climate. Numerous birds and insects head south for the winter. Migration is simply the travel of one place to another. Most animals seek warmer temperatures and food during the migration process. Birds and butterflies fly for very long distances every year to reach better conditions. Some mammals, such as bats and whales also migrate in search of food. Even fish will swim to deeper, warmer waters to survive the winter months.

Insects and other creatures such as termites and worms simply move down further into the earth. Some earthworms will dig as far as six feet below the surface. Others form galls, which is a swelling on a plant. Certain insects form a chemical that affects the plant's growth in that area and it forms a lump. The gall becomes the insect's home and food source.

Even though we, as humans, may not like the cooler temperatures and complain about the weather, consider how much easier it is for us than the wildlife. If you're feeling sorry for these creatures, you could help them out by placing food or shelter in your yard. Birdhouses, feeders and even shrubbery and trees are a godsend for many animals.