
SPRINGS

THE RACHEL CARSON CENTER REVIEW

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WHY I SLEEP OUTSIDE

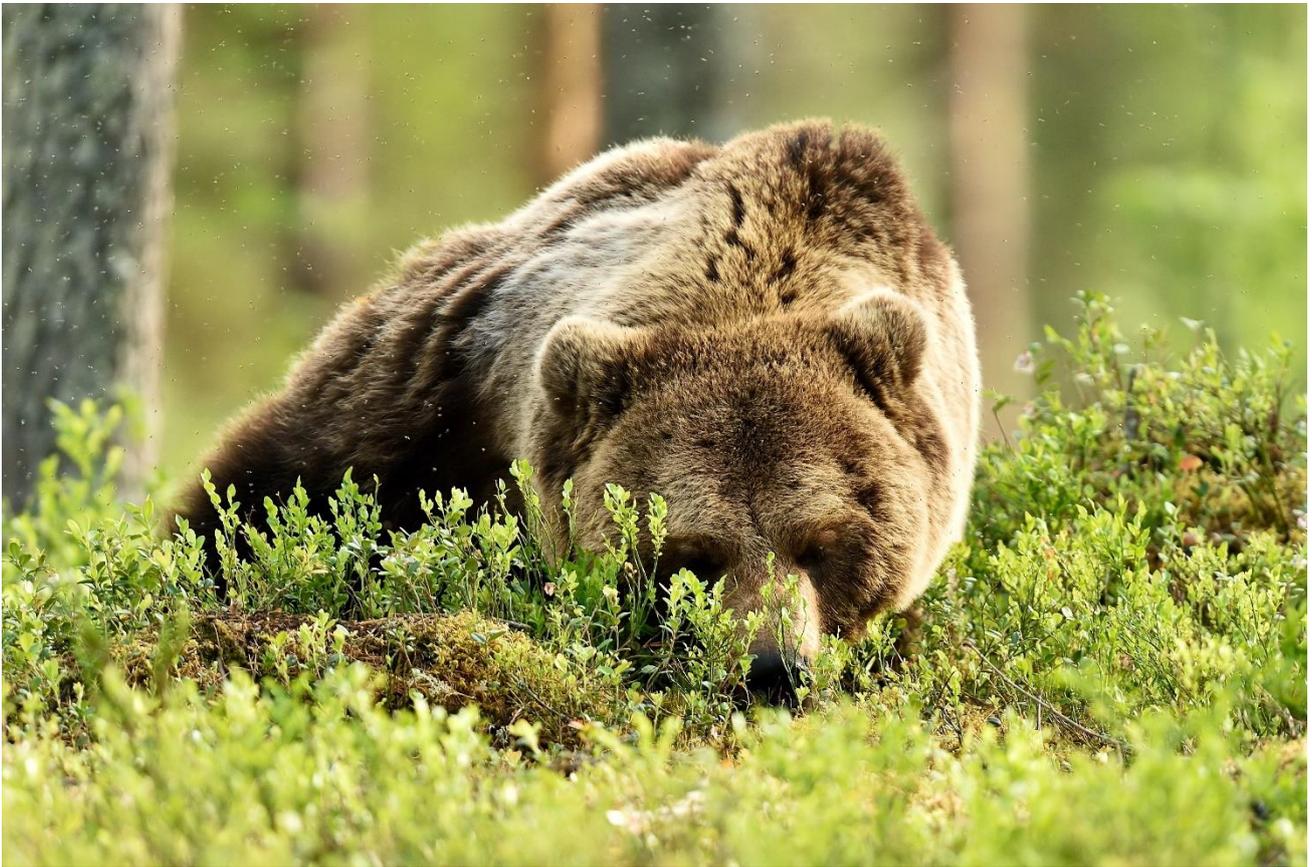
Elin Kelsey

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I can't quite remember when I first pulled a camping mat and sleeping bag under my covered back deck and hunkered down for the night. That makeshift arrangement has evolved into a full-size bed, down duvets, and a secure sleeping space. But I do know why I sleep outside. I do it because I am nature: Because I am less than whole when separated from the wind, the rain, the scent of earth, the rising crescendo of geese calling as they migrate through the night. I sleep outside because I am less alive within the sterile confines of monochromatic walls and temperature-controlled interiors, no matter how much I admire and appreciate their aesthetic design and beauty. I sleep outside because I cannot stand to miss even a single morning of spring birdsong, the chill of winter on my nose, or the moment when dusk turns to night. I sleep outside because I like the shock of leaving my cozy bed to hurry to the bathroom across a frozen, moonlit night, and the joy of returning to the warmth of my outdoor nest.



Sleeping brown bear. © ErikMandre on iStock. All rights reserved.

Experiencing the dry crack of subzero temperatures, the deluge of endless rain, or relentless blistering heat fuels my awe for other species. I watch a hummingbird rise high above my snow-drenched backyard, moving into a day with no provisions, no backup, utterly dependent on its relationships with other species and our collective agency. "Birds have no pockets," I tell myself. I have turned this wondrous idea over and over again in my mind for many years, like a well-worn river stone, each time encountering its significance anew. That bird's life, and mine, are not isolated entities. We are both only breathing because of ocean plants creating the oxygen in the air and the fish that disperse the seeds of rainforest plants when the Amazon River floods. I would go hungry were it not for the winds that blow the pollen grains of wheat, oats, rice, and so many other

plants that I eat. The hummingbird's body undergoes a semi-hibernation every night.¹ Its heart rate and temperature may drop dramatically, and still it loses about a tenth of its weight before the morning.² This bird would go hungry were it not for the insects that also feast on those same crops.

When I close my eyes and snuggle beneath the covers, I like to imagine the gentle breathing of grizzly bears asleep in their mountain dens, and babies in Nordic countries napping as snowflakes blanket their prams. Like those babies, I am privileged to sleep in a safe place.³ I have the resources to make conscious, responsive choices about where to position my bed, what I wear, and how many blankets I need. The same is true for Finnish mothers in a study by Marjo Tourula and colleagues who demonstrated a fluency for reading the northern winter environment and creating calm, peaceful sleep experiences that honored their children as part of nature.⁴



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The practice of outdoor sleeping was actively promoted in Finland as an intervention in response to high infant mortality rates in the 1920s.⁵ The challenges and advantages became so self-evident that outdoor sleeping for children is now an embedded cultural practice, a norm in Finnish culture.

In recent years, an avalanche of published studies have revealed the physical, mental, emotional, and social benefits of time spent outside.⁶ The delights reveal themselves. Sleeping outside is restorative. It promotes relaxation and a contagious sense of well-being.⁷ We become more attentive to the needs of each other as we grow more aware of subtle changes in the weather and the seasons.⁸ How can I convey the luxurious sensation of air so thick with lavender, I can taste it on my breath, coupled with the heady realization that an individual bumblebee comes to tend those fragrant blossoms each morning, making micro-adjustments to the time it arrives exactly in sync with shifts in the timing of sunrise as spring gives way to summer? "Look," says my daughter, pausing

to sniff a clump of dahlias on her way to join me for a movie. We watch as individual bees fly into their own individual flower, bedding down for the night as the petals close tightly around them.

True, I could also tell tales about rats and blaring sirens and all-night parties, but those stories would be collaged with my growing appreciation of the social and emotional capacities of rats,⁹ and the unexpected beauty of listening to my neighbor, a professional musician, practicing her trumpet in the early hours before dawn, unaware that I was outside too, drifting in and out of sleep to Mahler's Blumine movement.

I used to be shy about telling people that I sleep outside. But not anymore. As wild swimming, forest bathing, urban birding, outdoor kindergartens, and other nature-based movements rapidly gain popularity, so too does momentum for conserving and restoring biodiversity. In the midst of converging crises of biodiversity loss, climate change, the global pandemic, and so many other urgent issues, the key role that nature-based solutions play in tackling climate and biodiversity goals is increasingly being recognized and mainstreamed.¹⁰

Lately, I've taken to asking friends and colleagues to sleep outside with me on their balconies or porches when I visit them in big cities. It's a quiet gesture; a sleepy form of activism; a way of connecting to the planetary community of 8.7 million species. I invite them to sleep outside because where we lay our heads is where we belong.

Notes

¹ Katie L. Burke, "How Hummingbirds Budget Nighttime Energy," *American Scientist* 110, no. 2 (March–April 2022): 70–71, <https://www.americanscientist.org/article/how-hummingbirds-budget-nighttime-energy>.

² "How Do Hummingbirds Survive the Winter? What Does This Have to Do with a Mission to Mars?" Education Blog, *National Geographic*, 11 January 2017, <https://blog.education.nationalgeographic.org/2017/01/11/how-do-hummingbirds-survive-the-winter-what-does-this-have-to-do-with-a-mission-to-mars/>.

³ "Victoria, British Columbia," Safe Cities Profile Series, Statistics Canada, 15 May 2020, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2020001/article/00001/victoria-eng.htm>.

⁴ Marjo Tourula, Tarjo Pölkki, and Arja Isola, "The Cultural Meaning of Children Sleeping Outdoors in Finnish Winter: A Qualitative Study from the Viewpoint of Mothers," *Journal of Transcultural Nursing* 24, no. 2 (22 January 2013): 171–79, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1043659612472200>.

⁵ Marjo Tourula, Arja Isola, and Juhani Hassi, "Children Sleeping Outdoors in Winter: Parents' Experiences of a Culturally Bound Childcare Practice," *International Journal of Circumpolar Health* 67, no. 2–3 (January 2008): 269–78, <https://doi.org/10.3402/ijch.v67i2-3.18284>.

⁶ Kirsten Weir, "Nurtured by Nature," *Monitor on Psychology* 51, no. 3 (1 April 2020): <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2020/04/nurtured-nature>.

⁷ Lam Thi Mai Huynh, Alexandros Gasparatos, Jie Su, Rodolfo Dam Lam, Ezekiel I. Grant, and Kensuke Fukushi, "Linking the Nonmaterial Dimensions of Human-Nature Relations and Human Well-Being through Cultural Ecosystem Services," *Science Advances* 8, no. 31 (5 August 2022): eabn8042, <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.abn8042>.

⁸ Noah Castelo, Katherine White, and Miranda R. Goode, "Nature Promotes Self-Transcendence and Prosocial Behavior," *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 76 (August 2021): 101639, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2021.101639>.

⁹ Manon K. Schweinfurth, "The Social Life of Norway Rats (*Rattus Norvegicus*)," *eLife* 9 (9 April 2020): e54020, <https://doi.org/10.7554/eLife.54020>.

¹⁰ "Why Nature Holds the Key to Meeting Climate Goals," UN Environment Programme, 15 November 2022, <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/why-nature-holds-key-meeting-climate-goals>.



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