

# IS CLIMATE CHANGE ALTERING ARCTIC GROUND SQUIRRELS' HIBERNATION PATTERNS?

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Arctic ground squirrels survive harsh Alaska winters by hibernating for over half the year.

Arctic ground squirrels have the ability to keep from freezing even when body temperatures dip below that mark on the thermometer enabling them to survive extreme winter climates. A new study (Science) analysed more than 25 years of climate and biological data. The findings include shorter hibernation periods and differences between male and female hibernation periods.

Arctic ground squirrels survive harsh Alaska winters by hibernating for over half the year. They still must spend energy to generate enough heat from stored fat to keep tissues from freezing. They resurface from their burrows more than three feet below the ground each spring, famished and eager to mate. The researchers found that females are changing when they end hibernation, emerging earlier every year, but males are not. Changes in females match earlier spring thaw.

The advantage of this phenomenon is that they do not need to use as much stored fat during hibernation and can begin foraging for roots and shoots, berries and seeds sooner in the spring. Scientists think this could lead to healthier litters and higher survival rates.

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