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[Main page](#)
[Contents](#)
[Current events](#)
[Random article](#)
[About Wikipedia](#)
[Contact us](#)
[Donate](#)

[Contribute](#)
[Help](#)
[Learn to edit](#)
[Community portal](#)
[Recent changes](#)
[Upload file](#)

[Tools](#)
[What links here](#)
[Related changes](#)
[Special pages](#)
[Permanent link](#)
[Page information](#)
[Cite this page](#)
[Wikidata item](#)

[Print/export](#)

[Download as PDF](#)
[In other projects](#)
[Wikimedia Commons](#)
[Wikiquote](#)

[Languages](#)

[Беларуская](#)
[Български](#)
[Català](#)
[Deutsch](#)
[Español](#)
[Esperanto](#)
[فارسی](#)
[Français](#)
[Gaeilge](#)

Not logged in [Talk](#) [Contributions](#) [Create account](#) [Log in](#)

Article [Talk](#) [Read](#) [Edit](#) [View history](#)

Bear (gay culture)

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In gay culture, a **bear** is a larger and often [hairier](#) man who projects an image of rugged [masculinity](#). However, in [San Francisco](#) during the 1970s, any hairy man of whatever shape was referred to as a 'bear' until the term was appropriated by larger men, and other words had to be used to describe hairy other-shaped men such as otter (slim), cub (young bear on the way), or wolf (hairy, medium build). The word 'manatee' describes a big, hairless man, i.e., a bear without hair.

In the mid-1980s gay men in the San Francisco Bay Area who called themselves 'bears' met informally at Bear Hug (sex) parties and via the newly-emerging Internet. The term 'bear' was popularized by Richard Bulger, who, along with his then partner [Chris Nelson](#) (1960–2006), founded *Bear Magazine* in 1987. George Mazzei wrote an article for *The Advocate* in 1979 called "Who's Who in the Zoo?",^[2] that characterized [gay men](#) as seven types of animals, including bears.^[3]

The bear concept can function as an identity or an affiliation, and there is ongoing debate in bear communities about what constitutes a bear. Some bears place importance on presenting a clear [masculine](#) image and may disdain or shun men who exhibit [effeminacy](#),^[4] while others consider acceptance and inclusiveness of all behavioural types to be an important value of the community.^[5]

Contents [hide]

- [History](#)
- [Characteristics](#)
- [References in popular culture and art](#)
- [Bear media](#)
- [International bear events](#)
- [Terminology](#)
- [See also](#)
- [References](#)
- [Further reading](#)



The International Bear Brotherhood Flag, the pride flag of the bear community. Craig Byrnes created this flag in 1995.^[1]



Bears celebrating the 2007 International Bear Rendezvous, an annual gathering of bears and bear-lovers held in [San Francisco](#).

- 한국어
- Հայերեն
- Italiano
- עברית
- مصرى
- Nederlands
- 日本語
- Polski
- Português
- Русский
- Simple English
- Српски / srpski
- Srpskohrvatski / српскохрватски
- Suomi
- Svenska
- Türkçe
- Українська
- Tiếng Việt
- 中文

[Edit links](#)

History [edit]



Bears at the 2009 Marcha Gay in Mexico City

In San Francisco in the 1970s, any hairy man of whatever shape was referred to as a 'bear' until the term was appropriated by larger men, and other words had to be used to describe hairy other-shaped men such as otter (slim), cub (young bear on the way), or wolf (hairy, medium build). The word 'manatee' describes a big, hairless man, i.e. a bear without hair.

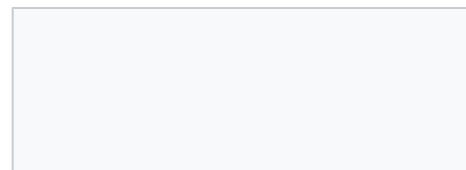
In the mid-1980s gay men in the San Francisco Bay Area who called themselves 'bears' met informally at Bear Hug (sex) parties and via the newly-emerging

Internet. The term 'bear' was popularized by Richard Bulger, who, along with his then partner [Chris Nelson](#) (1960–2006), founded *Bear Magazine* in 1987. George Mazzei wrote an article for *The Advocate* in 1979 called "Who's Who in the Zoo?",^[2] that characterized gay men as seven types of animals, including bears.^[3]

At the onset of the bear movement, some bears separated from the gay community at large, forming "bear clubs" to create social and sexual opportunities of their own. Many clubs are loosely organized social groups; others are modeled on leather [biker](#)-patch clubs, with a strict set of bylaws, membership requirements, and charities. Bear clubs often sponsor large yearly events – "bear runs" or "bear gatherings" like the annual events such as Southern HiBearNation in Melbourne, Bear Pride and Bear Essentials in Sydney, Bearstock in Adelaide, HiBearNation in St. Louis, Missouri, SF Bear Weekend, CBL's Bear Hunt,^[6] Bear Pride in Chicago, Atlanta Bear Pride, Texas Bear Round Up (TBRU) in Dallas, Orlando Bear Bash,^[7] and Bear Week in Provincetown (since 2001), drawing regional, national and international visitors. Many LGBT events attract a significant bear following, such as [Southern Decadence](#)^[8] in New Orleans.

"Sociology of the Urban Gay Bear," written by Les K. Wright, was the first article to appear in print, in *Drummer* magazine, edited by Jack Fritscher. [Jack Fritscher](#) was the founding editor of San Francisco's *California Action Guide* (1982). With *California Action Guide*, Fritscher became the first editor to publish the word "Bear" (with the gay culture meaning) on a magazine cover (November 1982).^[9] As well, with producer Mark Hemry in 1984, Fritscher co-founded the pioneering Palm Drive Video featuring homomasculine entertainment. Palm Drive Video expanded in 1996 to Palm Drive Publishing, San Francisco. For Palm Drive Fritscher wrote, cast, and directed more than 150 video features. His work includes documentary footage of the first bear contest (Pilsner Inn, February 1987). A bear contest is a feature at many bear events, a sort of masculine beauty pageant awarding titles and sashes (often made of [leather](#)) to winners. This footage is no longer for sale, as Fritscher declined to shift to DVD format and shut down the video company.

One example of a bear contest was International Mr. Bear, formerly held each February at the International Bear Rendezvous in [San Francisco](#). It attracted contestants, often with local titles, from all over the



world. The first International Mr. Bear was held in 1992, and the last was held in 2011. The contest included Bear, Daddy, Cub, and Grizzly titles with the contestant who received the highest score winning the bear title, regardless of what type he was. Example: "Mr. [Washington, D.C. Bear, 2006](#)". Gay "[leather-bears](#)" have competed in leather contests, and "[muscle-bears](#)" are another subculture noted by their muscular body mass.

The [International Bear Brotherhood Flag](#) is the pride flag of the bear community. Craig Byrnes created this flag in 1995.^[1]

The Bear History Project, founded by Les L. Wright in 1995, documented the emergence and early evolution of bear identity and bear community. It became the source material for much of *The Bear Book* (1999) and *The Bear Book II* (2001). Publication of *The Bear Book* led to the Library of Congress adding "bear" as a category. The [Bear History Project](#) is archived in the Human Sexuality Collection at Cornell University. It continues to be added to.

The bear community has spread all over the world, with bear clubs in many countries. Bear clubs often serve as social and sexual networks for their members, who can contribute to their local gay communities through fund-raising and other functions. Bear events have become very common, to include smaller sized cities and many rural areas. Most gay oriented campgrounds now include some type of bear-related event during their operating season.

The bear community constitutes a specialty niche in the commercial market. It offers [T-shirts](#) and other accessories as well as [calendars](#) and [porn movies](#) and magazines featuring bear icons, e.g., Jack Radcliffe. Catalina Video has a bear-themed line, the "Furry Features Series." Other adult studios who feature bear-type men are *Bear Magazine*, *100% BEEF Magazine*, BearFilms, Bear, Butch Bear, Raging Stallion, and Titan Media. There are also social media websites and smartphone apps that market to men of the bear community.

As the bear community has matured, so has its music and literature, as well as other (non-pornographic) arts, media, and culture. Examples include Bearapalooza, a traveling bear music festival; Bear Bones Books, an imprint of LGBTQ publisher [Lethe Press](#), which markets fiction, nonfiction, and poetry titles written by and for bears; BearRadio.net, which streams bear and LGBT music and bear-themed podcast shows. "Bear Icons, the first bear-themed art exhibit (1999-2002), toured to Boston, Provincetown, New York City, and Washington, DC. The larger organized bear runs often host a "bear market" area where artisans, musicians, and others offer items for sale.

As more gay men have identified themselves as bears, more [bars](#), especially leather or western



Mr. DC Bear Cub 2006 and Mr. DC Bear 2006

bars, have become bear-friendly. Some bars cater specifically to bear patrons.^[10]

Characteristics [edit]

Jack Fritscher notes that bears celebrate "secondary sexual characteristics of the male: **facial hair**, **body hair**, proportional size, **baldness**."^[11] Since the late 2000s, **cisgender** women and **transgender men** with similar characteristics who identify as bears have begun to be recognized in the culture. ^{[12][13]}

Over the years, bear culture has subdivided itself. Many claim discrimination has increased within the bear community, as some men who self-identify as "bears" or "musclebears" do not welcome higher-bodyfat men (see **chub**) at their events. A common criticism of the bear community is that some self-described bears tend to exclude men who do not fit their standards of a "real bear." Fat (or lack of it) is seen by some as a political issue, some of whom see their overweight condition as a form of **self-acceptance**. Some also note a lack of **racial** diversity in the bear community, generally perceiving **hirsuteness** to be a standard of **physical attractiveness** that **genetically** favors **white** men **aesthetically**, socially and **sexually** among bears.^[14]



Bears marching in Melbourne's Pride March 2011

References in popular culture and art [edit]

The **International Bear Brotherhood Flag** is the pride flag of the bear community. Craig Byrnes created this flag in 1995.^[1]

In the season 14 episode of *The Simpsons* called "**Three Gays of the Condo**," originally aired in 2003, **Homer Simpson** is standing on the street in Springfield's gay district talking with **Waylon Smithers**. A group of Smithers' gay friends pass by on a street car and one of them shouts, "Hey Waylon! Who's the bear? Is that the Mr. Burns you're always talking about?" In the season 22 episode of *The Simpsons* called "**Flaming Moe**", originally aired in 2011, the name of Grizzly Shawn, a gay male character, is a reference to the bear community.

The December 2007 issue of *Instinct* magazine featured an article by writer and director **Kevin Smith** on its "The Last Word" page. Smith wrote about his gay brother Don and about his (Kevin's) being on the cover of *A Bear's Life* magazine and the related cover story, and his feelings about being a "bear icon" in the gay community.^[15] Smith later made a cameo appearance in the 2012 film *BearCity 2: The Proposal*, playing himself in a brief conversation with a main character who works in the film industry.

In the season 2 episode of *The Cleveland Show* called "Terry Unmarried", originally aired in 2011, Cleveland Brown, Holt Richter, Tim the Bear, and Lester Krinklesac went to a gay bar called Into the Wild. Cleveland discovers his best friend Terry Kimple and his boyfriend are gay. Referring to a gay man in the community, Paul said "Ever since then, it's been Terr and the Bear."

In the 2015 *Pixar* movie *Inside Out*, the character Disgust says there are no bears in San Francisco. The character Anger disagrees, saying, "I saw a really hairy guy. He looked like a bear."^[16]

The *San Francisco South of Market Leather History Alley* consists of four works of art along Ringold Alley honoring *leather culture*; it opened in 2017.^[17] One of the works of art is metal bootprints along the curb which honor 28 people (including T. Michael "Lurch" Sutton, biker and co-founder of the Bears of San Francisco) who were an important part of the leather communities of San Francisco.^[18]

In the gay comic *AJ & Magnus*, an adoptive father named John Parker is a bear.

Bear media [edit]

A variety of media has been established specifically to cater to bears. The Internet comic strip *Bear with Me* centers around the life of the bear Andy McCubbin, a rich entrepreneur and heir to the Howell/McCubbin fortune, and his friends and family.^[19] A vast majority of the other characters are also bears. The comics are created by Tim Vanderburg under the pen name Bruin.^[20] In Tim Barela's comic strip, *Leonard & Larry*, a majority of the male characters are bearded men, some self-identified as bears, most not.^[21] Another webcomic, *Blur the Lines*, frequently features bearish men and the two main characters, Rick and Drew, associate with the bear community; the former identifies as a chub, whereas the latter identifies as a chaser/cub. (See below for term definitions.) The events and characters depicted in the strip are inspired by the life of the author and artist, Bob Kusiak, who is also involved to some extent with the bear community.^[22]

Films depicting the bear community include *BearCity*, *BearCity 2: The Proposal* and *Cachorro*, and the comedy web series *Where the Bears Are*, *BULK: The Series*, and *Skeleton Crew*.

In 2012, Bear World Magazine was first published online in monthly PDF format. The magazine was the first lifestyle magazine for the bear community, offering an alternative from the beefcake and pornographic magazines in print. Over the years, Bear World Magazine has grown into the world's leading bear lifestyle magazine having transformed into a popular news and magazine website.^[23]

In 2013, gay singer-songwriter *Tom Goss* released his song "Bears", singing about the bear community's open-mindedness and size-inclusivity.^[24]

International bear events [edit]

Bear event	Location	Month	Start
Bear Carnival	Gran Canaria	March	2018
Brighton Bear Weekend	Brighton	June	2010
Lisbon Bear Pride	Lisbon	May/June	
MadBear	Madrid	December	2000
Fierté Ours Paris	Paris	May/June	
Prague Bear Summer	Prague	August	2017

Stockholm Bear Weekend	Stockholm	May	
IstanBear Weekend	Istanbul	September	2011

Terminology [edit]

Further information: [LGBT slang](#)

Some slang terms relating to the bear community include the following:

- *Cub* – a younger (or younger-looking) version of a bear, sometimes but not always, with a smaller frame.^[25]
- *Chub* – A heavy-set man who might be described as [overweight](#) or [obese](#). These men are also a distinct subculture within the gay community, and may or may not identify with the bear movement *per se*.
- *Otter* – Considered a subspecies of "bear" by some, an Otter is a hairy slim or small-framed man.^[26]
- *Ursula* – A [lesbian](#) bear.^[27]
- *Panda* (or *Panda Bear*) – A bear of [Asian](#) descent.^[28]
- *Polar Bear* – An older bear whose facial and body hair is predominantly or entirely white or grey.^[28]
- *Trans Bear* - A transgender person, typically a trans man, who is hairy and heavy-set.
- *Wolf* - A wolf is a gay man with body and facial hair, but also has a very lean, muscular, athletic build.

See also [edit]

- [Bearforce 1](#)
- [Castro clone](#)
- [Dad bod](#)
- [Mythopoetic men's movement](#)
- [XXL \(club\)](#)
- [Circuit party](#)



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V · T · E Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) slang	
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