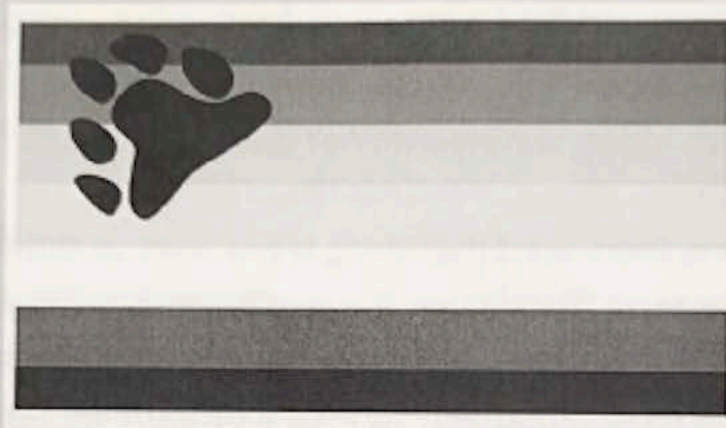


LGBTQ+ EDUCATION · 1 COMMENT · SEP 24, 2020

# INTERNATIONAL BEAR BROTHERHOOD: WHAT IT IS AND WHY IT'S IMPORTANT

## The International Bear Brotherhood



What it is & Why it's Important

## INTERNATIONAL BEAR BROTHERHOOD: WHAT IT IS AND WHY IT'S IMPORTANT

You may not have heard of the International Bear Brotherhood, but they have been supporting queer men for years. The name is a play on the slang term "bear," which refers to non-heterosexual men who are generally larger and have a fair amount of body/facial hair. This subgroup within the LGBTQ+ community is perfect for giving these men a way to feel even more connected to their identity and explore new ways to celebrate who they are.

Subcultures within the LGBTQ+ community have been wonderful ways for people to meet and support each other in more personal and meaningful ways inside the wider community.

So, what is the International Bear Brotherhood all about? Let's find out!

## WHO COUNTS AS A BEAR?

Typically, a man identifies as a bear if he is not heterosexual, has a large frame, is chubby or very muscular, and enjoys having a fair amount of body and facial hair.

Some bears go out of their way to grow longer beards or cultivate a rugged aesthetic. The bear lifestyle often calls for men to exhibit highly masculine behavior. However, the bear identity does not necessarily reflect a bear's desired partners. For example, a gay bear might want to be with other bears or with other men who do not identify as bears.

Within the bear subculture, there are other slang terms used as further identifiers. A bear of Asian descent may use the term "Panda," or, if a man is older, he may use the term "Polar Bear" to describe the fact that his body hair is mostly grey or white. Although rarely seen at bear events, some lesbians have tentatively formed a similar bear community where they take pride in their body hair. They have used the identity "Ursula" to refer to themselves.

The bear community has recently begun to accept transgender men and non-binary people as bears if they want to identify that way because inclusion is critical to the International Bear Brotherhood. Occasionally, smaller or younger men who join the bear community may be called "cubs" in a gentle, joking way. Other times, men who identify with the bear community who have light blond or red hair may be known as "lions" without any regard to age or stature.

# HISTORY OF THE BEARS AND THEIR FLAG

The slang term "bear" does not have a specific source, although in 1987, Richard Bulger and his partner Chris Nelson founded Bear Magazine for men who wanted to know more about the events and code of conduct within the subculture. Before that, the main mention of some gay and bisexual men as bears came from an article in *The Advocate* in 1979 by George Mazzei called "Who's Who in the Zoo?" where he described various gay subcultures as exotic animals.

As bear culture became increasingly popular in the 1970s and 1980s, small clubs began to form within the gay community. They were often modeled after biker clubs and had exclusive membership rules and regulations. Some of these clubs still exist today and use their money to donate to worthy causes through fundraising and other charitable enterprises. They also host bear events with clever names based on bear puns that allow men from all over the world to celebrate the traits they take pride in.

Some of the most popular events held around the world are:

- MadBear held in Madrid
- IstanBear Weekend held in Istanbul
- Fierté Ours Paris, held in Paris
- Southern HiBearNation held in Melbourne
- Texas Bear Round Up held in Dallas

The bears are proud and love to show it!

The flag now used by the International Bear Brotherhood was first created in 1995 by Craig Byrnes, a noted member of the bear community who was writing his senior thesis about the subculture at the time.

Instead of using the colored stripes to identify who the flier is attracted to, like many other flags in the LGBTQ+ community, the bear flag instead showcases all of the colors that human skin and hair can come in. The bear community wanted to demonstrate that they would not tolerate any kind of discrimination or racism, so they included all skin colors, as well as a grey stripe to indicate that older men could identify as bears without worry.

## WHAT MAKES THE INTERNATIONAL BEAR BROTHERHOOD IMPORTANT?

Beginning in 2007, the International Bear Rendezvous started in San Francisco as a way for men participating in the bear subculture to meet each other and celebrate themselves.

The best part about this subculture is that it celebrates characteristics that might normally not be given a second thought or actively dismissed. Body hair, a normal and natural secondary sexual characteristic, is prized among bears and the people who are attracted to bears. Having a subculture to celebrate more individual and personal aspects of the body and sexuality is a healthy part of any large, thriving community.

Bear clubs and events are social networks aimed at their own subcommunity, so people can be sure that everyone has similar experiences and preferences.

In fact, now that the bear subculture has become so well-known, many Pride parades and other LGBTQ+ community events have a special event or place for the International Bear Brotherhood, so everyone can feel included and represented. There are also plenty of podcasts, music, and publishing houses seeking to promote bear artists within the bear community and outside of it.

Here at Pride Palace, we love that smaller communities have formed underneath the wider umbrella of the LGBTQ+ community because it helps people get the help or support they need from people who have gone through similar life experiences. The International Bear Brotherhood is just one example of how much fun people can have when they all get together to celebrate the things that they value and take pride in.

In today's beautiful world, the LGBTQ+ community is so large that it can be quite easy for someone to feel overwhelmed or intimidated when they first join. There are so many different kinds of people from all walks of life who are part of our community, that it is only natural to seek out people who either look or act similar to you or have dealt with similar experiences in their life to help bring a sense of belonging.

As humans, we are always looking for people we can relate to and feel a kinship with. The International Bear Brotherhood is just one subculture within the LGBTQ+ community that shrinks down the community, so people have a safe space where they know that the other

# IN SUMMARY

All bears on deck!

Although the term "bear" is slang for a larger, hairier gay or bisexual man, the International Bear Brotherhood takes the idea of a community much farther than that. They host events for men to come and enjoy themselves and meet new people within their community. You can always find someone friendly and welcoming at a bear event!

If you want to get inspired to find your own path to the International Bear Brotherhood, dive into some of our [coming out stories](#) to see how other people have celebrated their identity.

Bears are about as friendly, loving, and accepting as they come, so feel free to unleash your inner bear if that's what you're called to do!

Sources:

<https://thebearsociety.weebly.com/history.html>

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## 1 COMMENT

THOMAS SESSIONS

OCT 28, 2022

I am from Philadelphia and like to know any Bear organizations or events in the area?