



Bears in Mind - Fund for bears
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Giant panda (*Ailuropoda melanoleuca*)



The giant panda, the rarest of bear species, is found in mountainous areas in China. They mainly live on the east side of the Tibetan Plateau.

Origin

The giant panda is classified under the subfamily of *Ailuropodinae* and is the only existing representative of this family. Two subspecies have been recognized, *Ailuropoda melanoleuca melanoleuca* and *Ailuropoda melanoleuca qinlingensis*, or the small panda (also red panda) and the giant panda. The classification of the giant panda has been the subject of some debate: a diet consisting of bamboo, ambiguity as regards their ancestors and different anatomic characteristics all gave rise to uncertainty within the scientific community on whether the giant panda was indeed a true bear. Genetic research suggests that the panda is a real bear and therefore part of the *Ursidae* family. However, some doubt will always remain and a few experts believe that the giant panda and the small panda form a separate family altogether. Others disagree completely and believe that the panda is not a true bear but related to the raccoon. Opinions differ greatly on this subject. One could say that the small panda is indeed related to the raccoon and their relatives.

Habitat

The giant panda is found only in the impenetrable bamboo forests in the mountains at an elevation of 1,400 to 4,000 meter.

Appearance

The giant panda is very recognizable by its distinct black and white coloration. They have black patches around the eyes, making the eyes look unusually big. Another, less conspicuous, characteristic is the existence of a sixth finger: the panda has six fingers on the forelimbs instead of five. The giant panda has a body shape that is similar to that of a small bear. They are a little heavier and lower to the ground than most bears. The tail is relatively short and wide and the strong claws are non-retractable. The fur consists of thin, long hairs. The most striking characteristic are the unusual markings on the fur of the giant panda. The main colour is yellow-white, the legs are black and so are the patches around the eyes, the ears and a narrow strip across the shoulders.

Diet

Despite the fact that their ancestors were carnivores, the giant panda is primarily vegetarian. The giant panda eats mainly bamboo, although at times they will also eat some meat. Strangely enough, the digestive system of the giant panda is not adapted to the consumption of bamboo and other plant products. The

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panda therefore has to eat large amounts very often and feeds as often as 10 to 15 times a day and for a period of 10 to 12 hours a day.

<p>Size 150 - 180 cm length 70 - 80 cm height</p>	<p>Weight 80 – 120 kg.</p>	<p>Lifespan In captivity: 30 years In the wild: 15 years</p>
<p>Sexual Maturity Female: 4 - 8 years</p>	<p>Mating season March – May Period: 2 – 7 days</p>	<p>Gestation period Approximately 5 months</p>
<p>Number of litters Around 1 x per 2 years</p>	<p>Number of cubs 1 or 2</p>	<p>Weight at birth 85 – 150 grams</p>
<p>Lactation period Approximately 9 months</p>		

Hibernation

According to local people, the giant panda goes into hibernation. This is however extremely unlikely. Its main food source is always available in sufficient amounts and hibernation is therefore not necessary. When the weather turns cold, the giant panda simply moves to a warmer area. Also in captivity the giant panda is not known to hibernate.

Social behaviour

A giant panda living in the wild spends the day primarily resting, looking for food and feeding. When a panda feels threatened it will seek refuge in a tree. They are usually ground dwellers. The giant panda is generally solitary, except during mating season when they look for a mate. Recent research however indicates that some pandas in larger areas live in small groups that are in contact with each other, even outside of mating season. Pandas look very cute, but are just as dangerous as any other wild animal. There are reports of pandas attacking humans out of irritation.

Status

The establishment of some stable populations has led to a change in **IUCN-status** from 'Endangered' to 'Vulnerable'. But the panda is still under threat. There are a number of nature reserves for pandas in China and zoos are trying to breed pandas, however this has proven to be extremely difficult. Female pandas are particularly fussy when selecting a mate. It is estimated that approximately 1,865 pandas still live in the wild. Researchers are currently trying to maintain the panda population through special breeding programs, which use artificial insemination. Unfortunately, since the fertile period of the females is extremely short, only very few young are born. The panda population in the wild will therefore not grow very quickly.

Did you know?

- ... according to some experts many giant pandas are too lazy to mate
- ... in the wild almost 60 percent of young die immediately after birth
- ... pandas communicate with each other through sounds that resemble more the bleating of sheep than the roar of a bear.

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