

Giant Panda Facts

(Ailuropoda melanoleuca)



Giant panda. John J. Mosesso

What animal is black and white and loved all over the world? If you guessed the giant panda, you're right!

The giant panda is also known as the panda bear, bamboo bear, or in Chinese as Daxiongmao, the "large bear cat." In fact, its scientific name means "black and white cat-footed animal."

Giant pandas are found only in the mountains of central China—in small isolated areas of the north and central portions of the Sichuan Province, in the mountains bordering the southernmost part of Gansu Province and in the Qinling Mountains of the Shaanxi Province.

Giant pandas live in dense bamboo and coniferous forests at altitudes of 5,000 to 10,000 feet. The mountains are shrouded in heavy clouds with torrential rains or dense mist throughout the year.

Giant pandas have existed since the Pleistocene Era (about 600,000 years ago), when their geographic range extended throughout southern China. Fossil remains also have been found in present-day Burma.

Giant pandas are bears with striking black and white markings. The ears, eye patches, legs and shoulder band are black; the rest of the body is whitish. They have thick, woolly coats to insulate them from the cold. Adults are four to six feet long and may weigh up to 350 pounds—about the same size as the American black bear. However, unlike the black bear, giant pandas do not hibernate and cannot walk on their hind legs.

The giant panda has unique front paws—one of the wrist bones is enlarged and elongated and is used like a thumb, enabling the giant panda to grasp stalks of bamboo. They also have very powerful jaws and teeth to crush bamboo.

While bamboo stalks and roots make up about 95 percent of its diet, the giant panda also feeds on gentians, irises, crocuses, fish, and occasionally small rodents. It must eat 20 to 40 pounds of food each day to survive, and spends 10 to 16 hours a day feeding.

The giant panda reaches breeding maturity between 4 and 10 years of age. Mating usually takes place in the spring, and 3 to 5 months later,

one or two cubs weighing 3 to 5 ounces each is born in a sheltered den. Usually only one cub survives. The eyes open at 1 1/2 to 2 months and the cub becomes mobile at approximately three months of age. At 12 months the cub becomes totally independent. While their average life span in the wild is about 15 years, giant pandas in captivity have been known to live well into their twenties.

Scientists have debated for more than a century whether giant pandas belong to the bear family, the raccoon family, or a separate family of their own. This is because the giant panda and its cousin, the lesser or red panda, share many characteristics with both bears and raccoons. Recent DNA analysis indicates that giant pandas are more closely related to bears and red pandas are more closely related to raccoons. Accordingly, giant pandas are categorized in the bear family while red pandas are the only members of their family, *Ailuridae*.

In 1869, a French missionary and naturalist named Pere Armand David was the first European to describe the giant panda.

In 1936, clothing designer Ruth Harkness brought the first live giant panda, named Su-Lin, out of China and to the West. Su-Lin lived at Chicago's Brookfield Zoo and was a celebrity until he died in 1938.

Today, about 300 giant pandas are in captivity in Chinese zoos, reserves, and breeding centers. Only about 24 giant pandas live in zoos outside of China. In 1980, the first giant panda birth outside China occurred at the Mexico City Zoo.

Giant pandas are among the rarest mammals in the world—there are an estimated 1,600 left in the wild. Although adult giant pandas have few natural enemies, the young are sometimes preyed upon by leopards.

Habitat encroachment and destruction are the greatest threats to the continued existence of the giant panda. This is mainly because

of the demand for land and natural resources by China's 1.3 billion inhabitants.

To offset this situation, the Chinese government has set aside more than 40 nature reserves where bamboo flourishes and giant pandas are thought to live. The government also placed a moratorium on logging in panda habitat through 2010.

Giant pandas are also susceptible to poaching, or illegal killing, as their dense fur carries a high price in illegal markets in the Far East. The Chinese government has imposed life sentences for those convicted of poaching giant pandas. Recent sentences, however, have been much less.

The low reproductive capacity of the giant panda makes it more vulnerable to these threats, and less capable of rebounding from its low numbers.

In 1984, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listed the giant panda as an endangered species under the Endangered Species Act. Endangered means a species is considered in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range. This protection also prohibits giant pandas from being imported into the United States except under certain conditions.

The giant panda is also protected under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), a treaty among 175 nations aimed at illegal trade in endangered animal and plant species.

The Fish and Wildlife Service is the federal agency responsible for the U.S. government's implementation of CITES. The Service has established a panda policy to assist zoos applying for giant panda importation permits. The policy focuses on the conservation of the species in the wild.

Giant pandas are currently housed in four U.S. zoos —San Diego, Atlanta, National, and Memphis — under permits issued by the Service following the Giant Panda Policy.

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
International Affairs
Division of Management Authority
4401 N. Fairfax Drive, Room 212
Arlington, VA 22203
703/358-2104 or 800/358-2104
Fax 703/358-2281
e-mail: managementauthority@fws.gov
www.fws.gov/international
www.fws.gov/international/dma_dsa/permits/permits_home.html

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