

Giant Panda

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ABOUT THE STUDY

Giant panda, (*Ailuropoda melanoleuca*), also called panda bear, bearlike mammal inhabiting bamboo forests in the mountains of central China. Its striking coat of black and white, combined with a bulky body and round face, gives it a captivating appearance that has endeared it to people worldwide. According to the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, fewer than 1,900 pandas are thought to remain in the wild. Large males may attain 1.8 metres (6 feet) in length and weigh more than 100 kg (220 pounds); females are usually smaller. Round black ears and black eye patches stand out against a white face and neck. Black limbs, tail, legs, and shoulders contrast with the white torso. The rear paws point inward, which gives pandas a waddling gait. Pandas can easily stand on their hind legs and are commonly observed somersaulting, rolling, and dust-bathing. Although somewhat awkward as climbers, pandas readily ascend trees and, on the basis of their resemblance to bears, are probably capable of swimming. An unusual anatomic characteristic is an enlarged wrist bone that functions somewhat like a thumb, enabling pandas to handle food with considerable dexterity.

NATURAL HISTORY

As much as 90–98 percent of the panda's diet consists of the leaves, shoots, and stems of bamboo, a large grass available year-round in much of China's forested regions. Despite adaptations in the forepaws, teeth, and jaws for bamboo consumption, the giant panda has retained the digestive system of its carnivore ancestry and is therefore unable to digest cellulose, a main constituent of bamboo. Pandas solve this problem by rapidly passing prodigious quantities of the grass through their digestive tracts on a daily basis. As much as 16 out of every 24 hours is spent feeding, and elimination of wastes occurs up to 50 times per day. Fossilized dental remains indicate that the giant panda committed to bamboo as its principal food source at least three million years ago. Although unable to capture prey, pandas retain a taste for meat, which is used as bait to capture them for radio collaring and has made them pests in human camps on occasion. The species cannot naturally survive outside bamboo forests, though in captivity they have been maintained on cereals, milk, and garden fruits and vegetables.

Bamboo is the healthier diet for captive pandas. The giant panda's solitary nature is underscored by its reliance on its sense of smell (olfaction). Each animal confine its activities to a range of about 4 to 6 square km (1.5 to 2.3 square miles), but these home ranges often overlap substantially. A large scent gland located just below the tail and surrounding the anus is used to leave olfactory messages for other pandas. The gland is rubbed against trees, rocks, and clumps of grass, with scent conveying information on identity, sex, and possibly social status of the marking individual. Chemical analysis of marks is consistent with a difference in function for males and females. Males appear to use scent to identify the areas where they live, whereas females primarily use it for signaling estrus.

CONSERVATION AND CLASSIFICATION

Fossils from northern Myanmar and Vietnam and much of China as far north as Beijing indicate that the giant panda was widely distributed throughout eastern Asia during the early Pleistocene Epoch (2.6 million to 11,700 years ago). Human destruction of its forest habitat, combined with poaching, has restricted the species to remote fragments of mountain habitat along the eastern edge of the Tibetan Plateau in the Chinese provinces of Sichuan (Szechwan), Shaanxi (Shensi), and Gansu (Kansu). The total area of these habitats is about 13,000 square km (5,000 square miles), and in recent times periodic mass flowering and die-offs of bamboo have brought starvation for some populations. (Five to 10 years are required for bamboo forests to recover from these natural events.) Since the 1990s China has greatly expanded its conservation efforts, and it now regards the panda as a national treasure. The reserve system has been expanded from 14 sites to more than 40, and cooperative international arrangements were implemented to provide training in reserve management and captive breeding. The panda had long been considered an endangered species by the IUCN, but the environmental organization changed the status of the panda to "vulnerable" in 2016, because of China's success in restoring bamboo forest habitat.

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