

Red Panda *Ailurus fulgens*

Classification

The red panda is closely related to raccoons (family Procyonidae). Formerly considered related to the giant panda with uncertain familial classification, and current genetic studies indicate that the giant panda is a species of bear. There is still a lot of confusion about the appropriate taxonomic placement of the red panda.

Class: Mammalia

Order: Carnivora

Family: Procyonidae

Genus: *Ailurus*

Species: *fulgens*

Distribution

The range of the red panda includes Nepal, the northern state of Sikkim and the eastern state of Assam in India, Bhutan, northern Myanmar (Burma) and the provinces of Yunnan and Sichuan in south-central China and along the border of Tibet.

Habitat

The red panda inhabits mountains, temperate forests and bamboo thickets at elevations of 6,000-13,000 feet. They prefer colder temperatures.

Physical Description

- The red panda's body is 20-25 inches (51-64 cm) long, with an 11-19 inch (28-48 cm) tail.
- Males weigh from 10 to 14 pounds (4.5-6.3 kg); females are smaller weighing six to 10 pounds (3-4.5 kg).
- They have soft, dense reddish fur on the back. Their legs and underside are dark and there is some white on their face and ears.
- The bushy tail has six distinctive yellowish rings.

Diet

What Does It Eat?

In the wild: Bamboo, berries, blossoms, bird eggs and the small leaves of other plants. They may also eat mice, birds, vegetables, fruits, acorns and roots.

At the zoo: Leaf-eater biscuits, panda biscuits, grapes and bamboo.

What Eats It?

Snow leopards prey on the red panda.

Social Organization

In the wild, red pandas are generally solitary but sometimes travel in pairs or small family groups.

Life Cycle

Red pandas are sexually mature at about 18 months. Mating season is from January to March. After a gestation of 90-150 days, the female gives birth to between one and four cubs in a nest built of sticks, grasses and leaves. The cubs are born blind but fully covered with hair. Their eyes open when they are 18 days old, and they leave the nest for the first time at about 90 days. The young are weaned at about five months, and once they are able to eat solid food begin leaving the nest at night. They remain with their mother until they are about a year old. Life span in the wild is unknown but they live about 14 years in captivity.

Adaptations

A Coat of Red Fur

The beautiful reddish fur of the red panda is made up of long coarse hairs with a dense undercoat that provides the warmth needed in their cool moist habitat. The soles of their feet are also covered with dense fur and their long heavily furred tails can be wrapped around their body to keep them warm.

Thumbs Up

The red panda has a radial sesamoid or modified thumb. Along with strong curved claws, this “false thumb” helps the red panda in climbing and grasping bamboo and other food. The red panda shares this adaptation with the giant panda.

Life In The Trees

Red panda are excellent climbers; their sharp, semi-retractable claws help them grip branches as they climb. By night, they come down to feed on the ground, but by day they spend most of their time curled up in the trees resting. Due to their low calorie diet, they need to spend considerable time resting. Life in the trees also protects them from predators on the ground.

Conservation Connection

IUCN Status: Endangered.

There are about 2500 red pandas left in the wild. They are endangered due to deforestation resulting in habitat loss, and illegal hunting for pelts.

Fun Facts

- Red pandas are sometimes called “Wah” because of their distinctive cry. They are also referred to as firefox, bear-cats and lesser pandas.
- The activity level of the red panda changes throughout the year based on the temperature, feeding regimes and the presence of young.
- Red pandas can eat 45% of their body weight daily. This amounts to about 200,000 bamboo leaves every day.
- Red pandas may be active during the day, however they are mainly crepuscular, meaning they are most active at dawn and dusk.

