

The Giant Panda Bear

Panda bears are very popular animals, partly because of their unusual appearance and partly because there is something mysterious and fascinating about them. However, their numbers are falling. It is thought that only around 1600 giant pandas still survive in the wild.

Appearance

Giant pandas have the same type of body shape as other bears. They have thick black and white fur, which some scientists think may be to disguise them in the snowy and rocky surroundings where they live. An adult can grow up to 1.5 metres and weigh up to 150 kilograms. They might look cute but they have razor-like claws. They also have powerful jaws for crushing and grinding bamboo!

Habitat

Giant pandas in the wild live on mountainous slopes in western China. Their habitat is densely populated with fir trees and bamboo. It is the forests in these mountains that attract the panda as bamboo is their favourite food.

Diet

In the wild, their main diet is bamboo. To survive, they need to eat for most of the day. In fact, they eat 15 to 30 kilograms of food every day and spend 10 to 16 hours feeding. In zoos, they have a specially prepared diet of bamboo, eggs, fish and honey.

Cubs

Newborn cubs weigh around 150 grams (about the weight of an apple) and are all white at birth. The black spots develop after about a month. They begin eating bamboo at six months and weigh 31 to 36 kilograms at the end of the first year. Cubs stay with their mother for two to three years, reach maturity at five to seven years and live in the wild for about 25 years.

Other interesting facts

- Giant panda bears have to eat every day which means, unlike other bears, they cannot hibernate in the winter.
- Giant pandas' bodies are able to digest meat but they rarely eat it.
- Until recently, scientists thought that pandas spent most of their lives alone, but new studies show that small groups of pandas can share a large territory.

Why are people concerned about the giant panda?

Many people fear that giant pandas will become extinct as only a few are born in the wild each year and they do not always survive. Bamboo supplies are diminishing in panda habitats, cutting off a vital food supply. In addition, poaching and humans moving into the pandas' territory have also reduced their numbers.

There are very few pandas in zoos, although this is changing. Where there are pandas in captivity, important programmes are in place to try to increase their numbers and find out more about these puzzling creatures.

How can people help?

There are projects where people are invited to 'adopt a panda'. The money goes towards researching, protecting and monitoring them. It also goes towards supporting them in the wild.

What about the future?

In two of China's main research centres, 19 cubs have been born. There are now over 300 pandas in captivity and the next challenge is to return them to the wild. The Chinese government has created 50 panda reserves to continue the work.

Did you know?

In China, the panda is a symbol of peace.

The Chinese word for panda is 'Xiongmao' (giant cat bear) because a panda's eyes are shaped like a cat's. Over the centuries, pandas have also been called 'spotted bear' and 'black and white bear'.





Grannie

I stayed with her when I was six then went
To live elsewhere when I was eight years old.
For ages I remembered her faint scent
Of lavender, the way she'd never scold
No matter what I'd done, and most of all
The way her smile seemed, somehow, to enfold
My whole world like a warm, protective shawl.

I knew that I was safe when she was near,
She was so tall, so wide, so large, she would
Stand mountainous between me and my fear,
Yet oh, so gentle, and she understood
Every hope and dream I ever had.
She praised me lavishly when I was good,
But never punished me when I was bad.

Years later war broke out and I became
A soldier and was wounded while in France.
Back home in hospital, still very lame,
I realised suddenly that circumstance
Had brought me close to that small town where she
Was living still. And so I seized the chance
To write and ask if she could visit me.

She came. And I still vividly recall
The shock that I received when she appeared
That dark cold day. Huge grannie was so small!
A tiny, frail, old lady. It was weird.
She hobbled through the ward to where I lay
And drew quite close and, hesitating, peered.
And then she smiled: and love lit up the day.