

Will the Red Panda Survive?

By Fiona Sunquist

A mask marks one of the cutest faces in the forest. The red panda looks a little like a raccoon, a bit like a fox, and somewhat like a puppy. Gentle eyes peek out from its mask, and a pointy little nose completes the face. Soft, cuddly reddish fur blankets its body, which is a tad larger than a big house cat. These harmless creatures live in the high mountain forests of the Himalaya in southeastern Asia. But their numbers in the wild are dwindling.

(See picture, "Red Panda Population Range.")

"Red pandas are endangered because their habitat is disappearing," says Miles Roberts, a red panda expert at the National Zoo in Washington, D.C. As loggers and firewood collectors chop down trees, and ranchers allow overgrazing by domestic livestock, the fragile mountain erodes. Such activities carve the red pandas' forest home into smaller patches.



(See picture, "Panda, Red.")

Specialized Diet

"Red pandas are also very vulnerable because of their specialized lifestyle and unique diet," adds Roberts. The red panda is one of just a few mammal species in the world that eat mainly bamboo. It's not the most nutritious stuff. This giant grass has tough stems and leaves that make it difficult to chew and digest. A bamboo diet doesn't give red pandas much energy, so they have to conserve as much as possible.

Slow-Moving Sleepyheads

Red pandas save energy simply by keeping activity to a minimum. They spend six to eight hours a day moving around and eating. The rest of their time is spent resting and sleeping. Their bodies are built to conserve energy. (See *Body Warmth of a Red Panda*.) When the weather is cold, the pandas curl into a tight ball on a tree branch. Warm and cozy in this position, red pandas go into a very deep sleep. This reduces their metabolism, or the amount of energy they use. When red pandas wake up, their metabolism returns to normal. But as soon as they go back to sleep their metabolism drops again, saving energy.

Panda Pals

For many years people assumed that the red panda and the better-known giant panda were cousins. They live in some of the same areas in Asia and they both eat a diet of bamboo. In fact, they're *not* closely related at all. (See *Pandas of Different Colors*.)

Still, the two pandas have a cool relationship. They're able to share bamboo resources where their homes overlap because they eat different parts of the bamboo plant. While the red panda selects only tender tips and shoots, the giant panda eats even the toughest stalks and stems. Because they share a habitat, Roberts points out, "many of the laws created to save the popular giant panda also end up protecting the red panda." As a team, two endangered species may survive!

Body Warmth of a Red Panda

Keeping your body warm uses a great deal of energy. That's why you tend to feel hungrier in cold weather--your body needs more fuel to keep warm. Red pandas often lose weight in winter because they can't get enough energy from their low-quality diet. Their furry coats help them survive.

Fur: A thick, woolly undercoat holds in body heat.

Paws: Fur covers its soles, keeping feet warm.

Tail: During cold or rainy weather a red panda sleeps tightly rolled up in a ball. It wraps its long, fluffy tail around itself like a muffler.

Pandas of Different Colors

(See picture, "Giant Panda.")

Similarities

- The teeth of both red and giant pandas are designed for crushing bamboo.
- Both have the "panda thumb," a wrist bone that sticks out like a thumb, helping them grasp bamboo.



Differences

- Giant pandas are related to bears.
- Red pandas are related to raccoons, coatis, and kinkajous.

The red panda's striking reddish-brown color is actually camouflage. It makes this cute animal hard to spot among the vegetation that grows on the trees where the red pandas live. Fewer than 2,000 adult red pandas live in the wild. Red pandas do well in captivity. Last December seven were born in a South African zoo, raising the zoo's red panda population to 21! To get the maximum nutrition from their food, red pandas carefully choose the bamboo's most tender leaves to eat.

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