

The Red Panda

What is a Red Panda?

The red panda is dwarfed by the black-and-white giant that shares its name. These pandas typically grow to the size of a house cat, though their big, bushy tails add an additional 18 inches. The pandas use their ringed tails as wraparound blankets in the chilly mountain heights.



Nobody can quite decide what animals red pandas are related to. At first, scientists thought they were related to raccoons because they have striped tails like raccoons. Then, after doing other tests, scientists thought they were related to bears, like black bears and polar bears. But it turns out that they're not very closely related to bears, either. Today, red pandas are classified into their own scientific family.

Red Panda Anatomy and Appearance

The Red Panda is about the same size as a large housecat, with a cat-like face and a long, bushy tail. Their rusty coloured thick fur covers their body with the exception of their almost white coloured ears, cheeks, muzzle and spots above their eyes. The Red Panda also has reddish brown stripes that run down either side of their white muzzle, along with alternating light and dark rings on their tails. The Red Panda also has semi-retractable claws to aid climbing and stability amongst the branches and strong, tough jaws which they use to chew on bamboo. Like the Giant Panda, the Red Panda also has an extended wrist bone which acts a bit like a thumb, allowing them to hold onto bamboo whilst they are chewing it. The Red Panda also has dense fur which helps to keep it warm during the cold winter along with having thick and woolly fur on the soles of their feet which not only helps to keep their feet warm but also prevents them from slipping on the wet branches.

Habitat

In the wild, red pandas live in mountain ranges in Asia. High up in the mountains, it gets cold a lot, but that doesn't bother the red pandas. They can wrap their tails around themselves like blankets to keep warm.

Red pandas live in forests in the mountains and like to spend most of their time in trees. Their red-brown colour is good camouflage in the forests because a lot of red-brown moss grows on the tree trunks. The red pandas blend right in with the moss! Red pandas also have feet that are built for climbing, with flexible ankles and claws to grab hold of the tree trunks.

Today, red pandas are in danger because people cut down their forests to make room for fields or to get wood for fuel.

Diet

Like giant pandas, red pandas mostly eat a green leafy plant called bamboo. But red pandas also eat all kinds of other plants and roots, the eggs of other animals and even small birds.



Breeding and Population

They are shy and solitary except when mating. Females give birth in the spring and summer, typically to one to four young. Young red pandas remain in their nests for about 90 days, during which time their mother cares for them. (Males take little or no interest in their offspring.)

The red panda has given scientists taxonomic fits. It has been classified as a relative of the giant panda, and also of the raccoon, with which it shares a ringed tail. Currently, red pandas are considered members of their own unique family—the Ailuridae.

Red pandas are an at-risk species, victims of deforestation. Their natural space is shrinking as more and more forests are destroyed by logging and the spread of agriculture.

Red pandas are most active at dawn, when the sun is rising, and at dusk, when the sun is setting. They sleep a lot during the day and do most of their hunting for food at night.

Red Panda Predators and Threats

Due to the fact that Red Pandas inhabit high-altitude mountain forests, they actually have fewer natural predators than they would have living further down the slopes. Snow Leopards and Martens are the only real predators of the Red Panda along with Birds of Prey and small carnivores that prey on the smaller and more vulnerable cubs. The biggest threat to the Red Panda however is people who have affected this species mainly through deforestation of their incredibly unique habitats. Due to Human encroachment, illegal hunting and poaching there have been drastic declines in the Red Panda population numbers with these populations also being pushed into more separate, isolated areas. One of the main concerns with this is that these populations will although be threatened by inbreeding leading to less successful individuals in these areas.

