

Red Panda



Kingdom: Animalia
Phylum: Chordata
Subphylum: Vertebrata
Class: Mammalia
Order: Carnivora
Family: Ailuridae
Genus: *Ailurus*
Species: *fulgens*



Photo courtesy of Karen Marzynski

Habitat

- **In the Wild:** The red panda is found in the mountains of the Himalayas, western China, northern Myanmar (Burma), and Laos. It is generally found on steep, mountainous slopes that are covered with mixed forests of coniferous (cone-bearing, evergreen) trees, deciduous hardwoods (trees that seasonally drop leaves), bamboo, and rhododendrons. It prefers altitudes between 5,000 and 15,000 feet.
- **Exhibit Location:** Wildlife Trails

Characteristics

- Body length: up to 44 inches long, including a 19-inch tail; Weight: 7-13 pounds.
- The red panda has a round head and large, erect, pointed ears. It has a long, dense, reddish-brown, wooly coat with lighter colored bands on the tail. Its undersides are dark reddish-brown or black. Its face is white, with a reddish-brown stripe extending down from each eye to the lower jaw (similar to a tear mark). It has black legs. The front legs are angled inward, which causes its waddling walk. The soles of its feet are covered with dense hair that gives protection from the cold and hides scent glands. The red panda's forepaws (front paws) have a false "thumb" that enables it to climb and grasp bamboo leaves and poles. The false "thumb" is actually an enlarged wrist bone. The claws are sharp and semi-retractile (partly retractable). It has 36- 38 teeth and strong jaw muscles. Such adaptations enable it to crush and to chew bamboo and to eat meat.
- **Lifespan: In the Wild** - 12 to 14 years (8-10 average); **In Captivity** - up to 14 years.

Behaviors

- The red panda is nocturnal, crepuscular (active at dawn and dusk) and arboreal (much of its time is spent in trees). During the day in cold weather, the red panda is usually found curled up in its nest with its tail wrapped around its head for warmth. When it is warmer, it may stretch out and dangle on a branch. Even though it has a gentle, quiet and curious nature, the red panda is very shy. Adults are generally solitary, except during mating season and throughout the time when a female is rearing its young. It descends trees headfirst and is very agile as it moves from branch to branch. Most feeding is done on the forest floor and its movement is often a slow gait while on the ground. When threatened it is capable of bounding up a tree. It can also strike out with its semi-retractile claws. Whether male or female, the red panda marks its territory with a musky scent from the anal gland, urine and/or feces. Its trails are also automatically marked with scent from glands on the soles of its feet. The usual communication is a series of short whistles and squeaks. However, when provoked or frightened, it stands on its hind legs and hisses and/or emits a series of snorts. Food is held in a forepaw and brought to the mouth while it is sitting, standing and/or lying on its back. After the red panda awakens and/or eats, it tends to lick its whole body and limbs, wash its face with a paw, and stretch or rub its back and abdomen against an available object.
- **Enrichments at the Zoo:** Bamboo is given in season along branches in the exhibit. To encourage foraging, Craisins are put into treat logs or balls with holes in them. There are hanging tubes with treats inside and buckets for them to play in. Fruit is scattered around to encourage foraging. For the younger cubs, there are stuffed animals to play with.

Reproduction

- Sexual maturity is reached at 18 months for both sexes. Males fight for breeding rights. During such fighting encounters, they will first arch their backs and lower their heads. Then they will stand on their

hind legs and use their forepaws to beat each other. Mating season is in winter, usually from early January to mid-March.

- The gestation period is 90 to 150 days which includes a period of delayed implantation. Birth usually occurs from mid-June to late July. Litters may contain 1-5 young, but usually only a pair is born.
- Before the female gives birth, she will use nesting materials (sticks, grass, leaves) to prepare her nest site, which may be in a hollow tree or in a rock crevice.
- At birth, the fully fur-covered cubs are blind and helpless. After 17-18 days, the cubs' eyes open. They leave the nest for the first time at around 90 days of age, usually during the night. They reach adult size at around 12 months of age. Usually the young stay with their mother for one year, or until the next litter is about to be born.

Diet

- **In the Wild:** Mainly bamboo, some fruit, grasses, roots, acorns, insects, eggs, young birds, small rodents, lichen
- **At the Zoo:** Marion Leaf-eater biscuits, grapes, coreless apples, mixed fruit (no melon) and bamboo (fresh in season; thawed from a frozen supply out of season)

Conservation Status

- **IUCN status:** Endangered; **CITES:** Appendix 1
- A major threat is the loss of habitat due to deforestation for timber, fuel and agriculture. The ever-increasing human populations have affected land that once provided trees for nesting sites and areas of bamboo forests. Domestic local livestock are now out-competing red pandas for food and land. Domestic dogs used for livestock threaten nests. The flowering and dying phases of bamboo threatens its survival. Poaching for the pet and fur trades continues to threaten the red panda. Its fur is used to make hats and clothing worn by local people in China. Its tail is used as a duster. Its skin is used during cultural ceremonies. The red panda is part of a Species Survival Plan (SSP). Many zoos, including Rosamond Gifford Zoo, are now actively involved in an intensive breeding program to assure its survival. To help with conservation efforts, make sure that you buy no products made of red panda fur, skin and/or other body parts and contribute to organizations that support red pandas.
- Predators of the red panda are snow leopards, yellow-necked martens and humans.

Did You Know?/Fun Facts

- A female red panda can eat approximately 200,000 bamboo leaves in one day.
- The red panda is the mascot of the International Tea Festival in Darjeeling.
- Also known as the lesser panda, it was discovered 48 years before the giant panda.

Sources:

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