

Macaca munzala



Family: Arunachal macaque

Common names: Mun zala
(Dirang Monpa tribe of
Arunachal Pradesh)

Classification:

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum: Chordata

Class: Mammalia

Order: Primates

Family: Cercopithecidae

Genus: *Macaca*

Species: *munzala*

Profile:

Macaca munzala is a new species of primates from the forests of western Arunachal Pradesh. It was discovered by scientists in 2003 and reported as a new species in 2005, more than a century after the last species of primates was discovered. However, the locals were aware of the existence of this species for quite sometime. In fact, the species name is derived from its local name “mun zala” in the dialect of the Dirang Monpa tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, which means ‘deep forest monkey’. The species, believed to be a close cousin of the Assamese macaque and the Tibetan macaque, is generally large and heavy-set and has a characteristic short tail, the length of which is intermediate between that of the Assamese macaque and the Tibetan macaque. The body varies from dark brown to chocolate brown, while the upper torso and hands and feet are pale brown. The animal is covered with long, dense hair on the upper body while the lower body has shorter, smoother hair. At the front of the crown, every individual has a prominent pale-yellow patch with a group of dark hairs in the centre. It has a lower projecting jaw and the upper part of the head is broader than the muzzle, especially in adult males. The face is dark brown with a prominent dark patch on each temple. The skin around the eyes is pale, giving the animal a spectacled appearance. In several individuals, the nose is of a lighter colour. In contrast to other macaques, the side-whiskers and beard are not prominently developed in this species. Although the local population, which is predominantly Buddhist, does not eat primates, they often kill them in retaliation against damage inflicted to their crops by these animals.

Lifespan: Unknown

Distribution: The species was recently reported from the high altitudes of western Arunachal Pradesh, India. It is unique in its altitudinal distribution as it largely occurs between 2000-3500 m, making it one of the highest dwelling primates in the world. This is the highest altitude at which any primate has ever been reported from the Indian subcontinent. In Arunachal Pradesh, the macaques are found distributed in Tawang district and the western region of West Kameng district. Some animals may also occur in the adjoining regions of Bhutan and Tibet.

Population: Less than 250 mature individuals (IUCN) (Figures are for wild population only)

Behaviour: Largely terrestrial, the macaques roam the forests in mixed groups of more than eighteen individuals, including multiple males and females and at least two infants. The animals have been observed to forage largely in secondary scrub habitat. As this species has been newly discovered, information about the behaviour is scanty. However, studies conducted by scientists suggest that the animals live in a matrifocal society (where the mother is the head of the household). Low levels of aggression observed during the studies suggest that a very tolerant social relationship exists within the group. The Tawang macaques were found to be extremely wary of humans.

- **Diet:** Scientists have observed that the species prefer feeding only on plant material like leaves, leaf stalks, bark, flowers and fruits. Local reports suggest that the animals occasionally feed on insect larvae and earthworms, although no documentation of this diet exists presently. Although researchers have observed a high proportion of fruit in

the diet, this may not necessarily mean that the animals are predominantly frugivorous as the diet may largely be influenced by the availability of food.

- **Reproduction:** Observations suggest that the inter-birth interval is two years and the birth season as spring. However, further studies are necessary before the data can be confirmed.

Current status:

- **Status:**
 1. IUCN 2008: Endangered
 2. CITES 2008: Listed in Appendix II
- **Threats:**
 1. Retaliatory killing by people during crop depredation.
 2. Macaques are hunted by some non-local people for food.
- **Conservation practices:**
 1. It is yet to be listed on the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act of 1972.
 2. The establishment of conservation programmes, community awareness programmes and the designation of a protected area, are some of the suggestions that have been put forward by scientists.