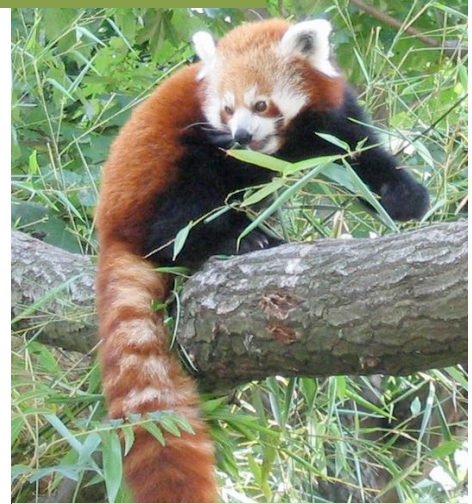


Macaca munzala



Common name: Lesser Panda, Red Panda, Red Cat-bear, Fire Fox

Local names: Nigalya Ponya (Nepali), Oakdonga (Bhotia), Sankam (Lepcha)

Classification:

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum: Chordata

Class: Mammalia

Order: Carnivora

Family: Ailuridae

Genus: *Ailuridae*

Species: *fulgen*

Profile:

The red panda is often referred to as the “lesser panda” to differentiate it from the better-known giant panda (*Ailuropoda melanoleuca*). It is the only species of its kind in the world, with no close living relatives, unique in its behavior and specialized in its habitat requirements. Much smaller than the giant panda and slightly larger than the domestic cat, it resembles a raccoon in size and appearance. The animal has a bear-like body with russet coloured fur on the upper body and blackish fur on the lower body. It has a light coloured face with tear markings and white badges on the sides of the head and above the eyes. The round head has upright ears, a pointed snout with a black nose and pitch black eyes. The animal is around 79-120 cm in length. The males weigh about 4.5-6.2 kg while females weigh around 3-4.5 kg. The long bushy tail (30-60 cm) with its six alternating transverse rings of red and yellow, provides balance and camouflage to the animal. Like the giant pandas, the red pandas have a false thumb, which is an extension of the wrist bone and provides better grip to the animal. The red panda is a specialized bamboo feeder with strong, sharp, curved semi-retractile claws and strong cranial-dental features. It is the state animal of Sikkim, India. It is also the mascot of the Darjeeling international festivals. The species is an indicator of the overall health of the eastern Himalayan broad-leafed forests. Thus, protecting the red panda is important for preserving the natural heritage of the eastern Himalayas.

Lifespan: The maximum lifespan of the red panda is 13 years, but the average span is 8-10 years.

Distribution: Distribution is disjunct rather than continuous. Its range includes Nepal, India, Bhutan, Myanmar, and southern China. The red panda lives in the temperate forests of the Himalayas at elevations of 4900-13000 ft. They are restricted to only a few small, fragile areas in this vast range because of their dependence on the bamboo plants. In India, the animal is relatively common in Tawang and northern West Kameng Districts and in Mishmi Hills, especially Dibang Valley and Lohit Districts.

Population: Less than 10,000 mature individuals (IUCN)

Behaviour: Red pandas are crepuscular, that is they are most active during dawn and dusk. Generally, they do not venture below an altitude of 1800 m. They are very sensitive to heat and cannot tolerate temperatures above 25°C. They are usually solitary except during mating season and when the female is raising her offspring. A female red panda picks a location such as a tree hollow or rock crevice for its maternal den. The young grows relatively slowly and hence have an extended association with the mother, lasting over a year. The species is a good tree climber and spends most of the time in trees when not foraging. They flee when threatened. However, if cornered, they stand on their hind feet and extend their razor-sharp claws to defend themselves. Predators include the snow leopard.

- **Diet:** Despite having a digestive system suited for carnivores, the red panda is a bamboo feeder. Since it cannot digest cellulose, it has to consume a large volume of bamboo in order to survive. They also feed on berries, fruits, lichen, roots, acorns, and mushrooms. Occasionally they eat fish, eggs, small rodents, young birds and insects. The animal is usually quite lethargic because of the low calorie value of their bamboo diet.

- **Reproduction:** Breeding season: December end to mid-February; Breeding interval: Once a year; Gestation period: 112-158 days; Litter size: 1-4; Weaning: 6-8 months; Sexual maturity: 18 months (both male and females)

Current status:

- **Status:**
 1. IUCN 2008: Vulnerable
 2. CITES 2008: Listed in Appendix I
- **Threats:**
 1. Habitat loss and fragmentation due to legal and illegal logging, firewood collection, forest clearing for habitation and farming, jhum (slash-and-burn shifting cultivation) by the hill tribes of north-east India, livestock grazing and destructive land management practices.
 2. Over-harvesting of forest products such as Malingo, a small bamboo that is the Red Panda's main food source
 3. Poaching for their fur and tails, especially in China and Bhutan.
 4. Illegal pet trade
 5. Loss of genetic variability due to inbreeding depression.
 6. The animals have a slow reproductive rate which is contributing to their decline
- **Conservation practices:**
 1. The red panda is protected under Schedule I of the Indian Wild Life (Protection) Act 1972.
 2. It is legally protected in Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Nepal.
 3. The Valley Zoo in Edmonton has a successful breeding program for red pandas and has successfully bred two pairs of red pandas in 2007 and 2008.
 4. The Padmaja Naidu Himalayan Zoological Park at Darjeeling has also been successful in conservation breeding of red pandas.