**Small Bear or Large Raccoon?**

Giant pandas are generally referred to as bears and are typically called panda bears rather than giant pandas. Though we may think they look like bears, there has been a great deal of discussion for decades about where giant pandas fit in the animal kingdom. Much of the debate has been whether they are more closely related to the red panda, once thought to be a member of the raccoon family, than the bear family.

While a giant panda has a body that resembles a small bear and climbs trees like a bear, it also has several characteristics in common with the red panda. For example, both giant pandas and red pandas eat bamboo and have the same pseudo thumb. The table below lists the main characteristics the giant panda shares with bears and red pandas.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Bear** | **Red Panda** |
| Shape | Diet |
| Size | Paws |
| Shaggy fur | Eyes |
| Gait | Nose and teeth |

**Cat-like features**

While the body of a giant panda looks like that of a bear and the dark circles around its eyes resemble those of a red panda or raccoon, its pupils have vertical slits like the eyes of a cat. Because of their unusual eyes, a popular Chinese name for panda is ‘big bear cat’ or大‍熊‍貓 /dà xióng māo, pronounced as dah-sshyong-maow.

**DNA results**

DNA analysis has put one mystery to rest. It has revealed that while the red panda is a distant relation, the giant panda's closest relative is the spectacled bear from South America.