

# The Giant Panda

The giant panda, which only lives in China outside of captivity, has captured the hearts of people of all ages across the globe. From their furry black and white bodies to their shy and docile nature, they are considered one of the world's most loved animals.



**Quick Fact** The estimated number of giant pandas in the wild varies between 1,500 and 3,000.

## Intriguing Giant Panda Mysteries

While most adore their fluffy fur and round heads, which help give them their cuddly bear quality, others are fascinated by the many mysteries of the giant panda. Did you know that the giant panda may actually be a raccoon, they have an opposable pseudo thumb, and that they're technically a carnivore even though their diet is primarily vegetarian? These things and more have baffled scientists and naturalists for hundreds of years.

## 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

## Other Fun Giant Panda Facts

1. Researchers have recently discovered that the gene responsible for tasting savory or umami flavors, such as meat, is inactive in giant pandas.
2. For many centuries, giant pandas were thought to be a mythical creature, like a dragon or unicorn.
3. Unlike other bears in the region, giant pandas don't hibernate.
4. Giant pandas can stand erect on their hind legs but rarely walk.