

Mar 2022 | Issue 3 | Volume 2

EARTHHERO



• Mammals • Birds • Reptiles • Insects



MAMMALS

(THE SUN BEAR)

Bears are one of the most recognizable mammals in the world. From giant pandas in China to polar bears in Alaska, bears are found in a variety of habitats around the world. They live in continents like Asia, North America, South America and Europe. This includes our country, Malaysia, where we have the smallest member of the bear family called the sun bear or also known as the Malayan sun bear. They can be found in both Peninsular Malaysia and East Malaysia. Besides Malaysia, sun bears can be found primarily in South East Asian countries such as Myanmar, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Indonesia. They inhabit the lowlands and hilly areas of the tropical forest.



Being the smallest species of bears in the world, adult sun bears weigh only between 25-65 kilograms. The males, which are slightly larger than females, are about 150 centimeters in length with a shoulder height of nearly 70 centimeters. Being this small allows them to be very agile when moving up on trees. This also makes them the most arboreal bear species as they spend most of their time on trees.

The Malayan sun bear's name is believed to describe the pattern found on their chest. Researchers observed that this pattern is unique to each bear and is used to identify the individual bears. The pattern is a crescent or bib-shaped golden or white color patch on their chest, which is said to represent the rising sun. Besides this marking on the chest, the Malayan sun bears are almost totally black with a pale short muzzle. The black fur is short and smooth, making them difficult to spot in the forest. Their thick fur provides good protection from scratching caused by tree branches and also weather elements of the tropics. They have short tails that are also covered in fur and remarkably long tongues, which can be over 25 centimeters. Despite being small, their bodies have muscular build, with very powerful jaws, curved, long and sharp claws. This look makes some people call them 'dog bear'.



Malayan sun bear spent a lot of time foraging for food in the forest. They are mainly active during the day but are also observed to be active at night in areas frequented by humans. Having poor eyesight and hearing, sun bears rely on their superior sense of smell when foraging for food. They are omnivores and feed on a variety of food which includes termites and ants, plants, fruits, and selected small vertebrates and invertebrates. Their favorite food is honey. Sun bears will go a long way to obtain honey from bees' nested high on a tree. They will use their long claws to climb the

trees and rip apart the nest before using their long tongue to lick the sweet honey. Their long claws and tongue are also used to rip open termite mounds and rotten logs when looking for insects. Their powerful jaws are strong enough to break open a coconut and bamboo with ease.

One of the unique behaviors of sun bears is that they build nests or bedding high up on trees. These are made out of leafy branches that are folded together on sturdy branches or lianas. Being excellent climbers, they climb trees to sunbathe or rest on tree branches, tree cavities and sometimes inside hollow logs of fallen trees. Sun bears are also good swimmers and don't mind getting their fur wet especially when foraging for food in puddles and small rivers. Unlike a few other bear species, sun bears do not seem to hibernate and are active throughout the year.



Sun bears become sexually mature at around the age of 2 to 4 years. They are known to breed throughout the year, with females giving birth to one or two cubs after a gestation period that ranges between 95 to 240 days. Scientists do not have enough information on their actual pregnancy period, especially for wild populations which has resulted in a wide range of days for its pregnancy length. Sun bear mothers, called sows, give birth inside hollow tree cavities to deaf and blind cubs. The babies only weigh around 325 grams.

Their eyes will start to open around day 25 as their sight and hearing improves over the first 50 days of their life. The cubs will remain with their mother for the first 3 years before being fully independent. They can live up to 25 years in the wild, while the ones in captivity have been recorded to live up to 30 years.

Sun bears are known as forest engineers. This is because they play important roles in the forest ecosystem. They are an excellent seed disperser as they spread different kinds of seeds in the forest. Their foraging behavior enhances the forest's nutrients by mixing soils when they are digging for termites and invertebrates. They also create nesting sites



for other animals when they tear open tree trunks for honey, creating new cavities that can be used by birds and squirrels. Sun bears keep the termite population in balance, saving many trees from termite infestations.

©Mark Louis Benedict

Despite their important roles in the forest ecosystem, sun bears are facing several threats to their survival. Heavy deforestation for agriculture and logging is the biggest threats. The shrinking habitat pushes them much closer to human settlements and exposes the sun bears to human-animal conflicts. Farmers will see them as pests to their crops which include oil palm, banana and papaya. Being close to humans will also expose the sun bears to poachers who hunt them for their body parts which are targeted for traditional Chinese medicine and their fur. Poachers also target the cubs to sell them illegally as pets as it fetches them a high price because of their cute and cuddly looks. Keeping sun bears as pets is a dangerous practice despite their cute look. They are wild animals with very unpredictable behavior and can inflict serious injury when provoked.



All these threats have resulted in the decline of the sun bear population in the wild. They have been classified as 'Vulnerable' under the IUCN Red List in year 2007, putting them at high risk of extinction if the threats are not addressed. We should work together to protect their habitats and not support the illegal wildlife trade. If you see a sun bear being kept as a pet, please report it to the authorities immediately. We need to protect the remaining sun bears so they can continue playing their crucial role as the forest engineers to our ecosystem.