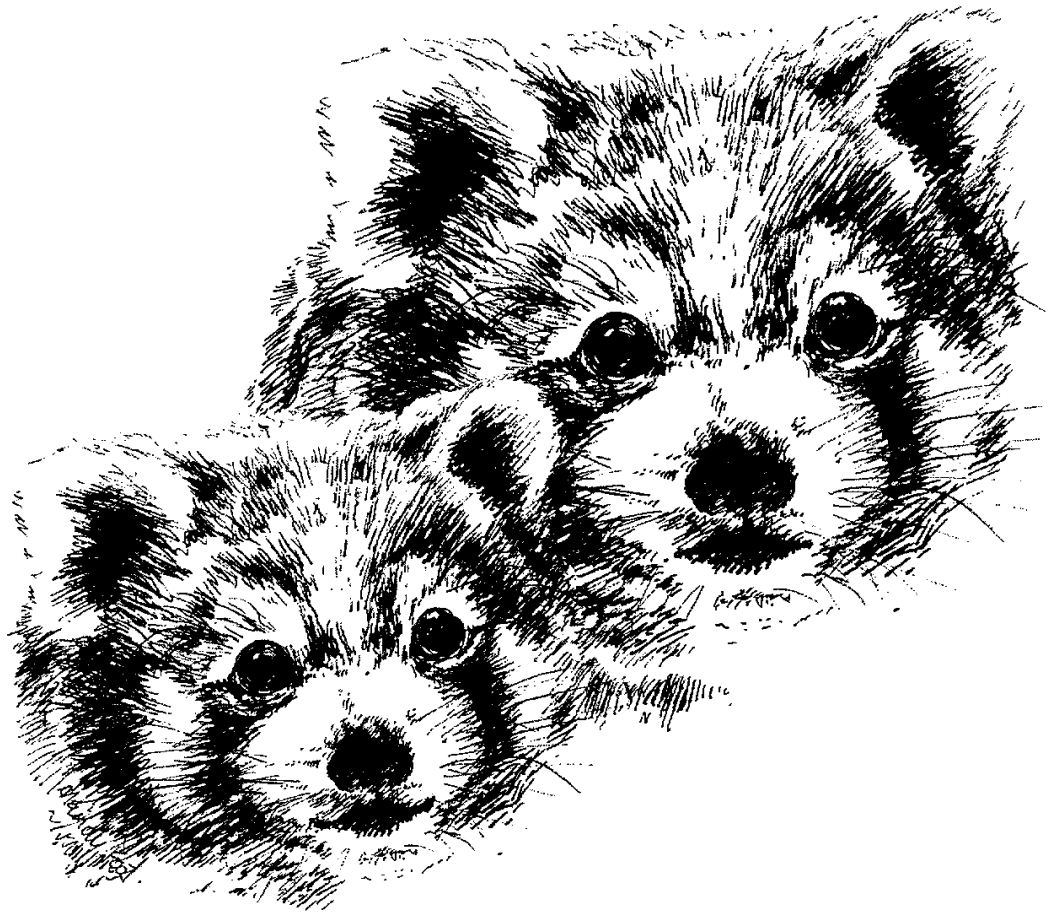


RED PANDA



notes

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The Red Panda (*Ailurus fulgens*) is a Threatened Species and it could well be that in the foreseeable future only captive animals will remain.

The Adelaide Zoo has kept Red Pandas since 1975 and its very successful breeding program - producing over 20 cubs in the same number of years - is of great importance. Red Panda cubs from Adelaide Zoo have been sent to zoos all over the world, for example Hong Kong, Sweden, Edinburgh and Rotterdam. Red Pandas are kept in around 40 zoos worldwide which allows an exchange of genetic material. Exchanges are arranged through an international species management plan.

Cat-bear, Fox-cat, Fire-fox, Himalayan Raccoon are all other names used to identify the Red Panda and

for those interested in Taxonomy (the classifying and naming of animals and plants) this animal has raised many questions. How closely is it related to the Giant Panda and the bears? It is generally agreed that it is closer to the racoon family but many biologists would place it in a group of its own. It is a truly unique animal. Fossil records show that the Red Panda is still basically the same today as it was 5 million years ago.

The Red Panda has long, soft, rich, reddish-brown fur with a ringed bushy tail. The underside and limbs are black. The face is pale coloured with a rusty red streak curving downward from each eye to the corner of the mouth.

Red Pandas grow to about 1 metre in length

(around one third is tail) and may weigh 3 to 5 kilograms. They have an extra thumb for grasping objects. This 'extra thumb' is actually a bone covered by a fleshy pad and grows from the wrist of each front paw. The true thumb is used as a finger and their claws are semi-retractable.

In the wild the Red Panda is found in the Eastern Himalayan mountains through to Western China. It is a temperate forest species living in altitudes between 2000 and 4000 metres. Essentially it feeds as a herbivore, feeding on bamboo shoots, seeds, roots, wild cherries and berries. However it is believed that the Red Panda was once actually a carnivore that has adapted to this herbivorous way of life. It may occasionally eat a small bird or mammal but there is some dispute about this.

A nocturnal animal, the Red Panda will climb trees where it will sleep during the day and forage for food at dawn and dusk. In the Adelaide Zoo the Red Panda's diet consists mainly of bamboo, milk mix and fruit – the fresher the fruit the more willingly it is received! A high level of cleanliness in food preparation areas and trays is essential and daily observations of the animals may determine a need to modify their diet, for example less milk.

In the wild, the Red Panda may live alone, in pairs or in family groups. In the Zoo, breeding pairs are housed separately. The female Red Panda is ready to breed at 18 months and has a gestation period of approximately 130 days. The cubs, usually 2 per litter, are born in mid summer and are cared for by the female. The young are independent at 8-10 months at which time they are removed from the parents to form new pairs or sent to other zoos.

Being an animal from high altitudes and liking shade and cool conditions, our hot summers are not appreciated. Overhead sprinkler systems have been installed in the enclosures to ensure the animals' comfort on hot days.

The impact of humans on the Red Panda has been devastating. Their habitat has been destroyed (and hence food source reduced) as forests are cleared for fuel and building materials and to provide farm land. The Red Panda has also been hunted for its fur and tail which have been used for dusters and brushes.

The Red Panda has been described as a gentle, inquisitive animal in captivity, although they do not like to be handled. Fortunately the Red Panda's chances of surviving and breeding in captivity are very good. This at least will help to ensure that future generations will be able to study and enjoy this delightful animal. It can only be hoped that with increasing public concern and awareness the Red Panda may be allowed to exist in the wild.

