



Andean bear

Tremarctos ornatus

Description: The Andean, or spectacled, bear is a small black bear with cream-colored facial markings around its eyes that give it its name. Females weigh about 150 pounds and males may reach 250 pounds. They have a total body length of 60 to 72 inches.

Range: The spectacled bear is found in Venezuela, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru.



Habitat: It lives in a variety of forested Andes mountain habitats, ranging in elevation from 500 to 14,000 feet. The Andean bear is an excellent tree climber and forages in the trees. It is most often found in what is called the cloud forest, a lush, misty ecosystem of the Andes. The spectacled bear is thought to play a vital role in the forest by scattering seeds through its droppings, a function called seed dispersal.

Diet: The favorite food of the Andean bear is fruit and it will also eat varieties of bromeliads, rodents and insects. When feeding in fruit trees the spectacled bear will bend back many branches forming a "nest" that will serve as a feeding platform and a daytime refuge. When a Andean bear strays into human farmland it is often shot on sight because it is considered a pest species for both the farmer's crops and livestock.

Social Organization: Little is known about the behavior of this shy forest bear. It is believed that they are mostly nocturnal and spend the day time sleeping in self-made tree nests, large tree root cavities or on ground beds. At sites of abundant food, as with fruiting trees, several bears can be seen feeding in close proximity with very little interaction between them. Only mothers with young have been seen traveling together so it is assumed spectacled bears lead solitary lives.

Reproduction: Females reach sexual maturity between 4 and 7 years of age. Spectacled bears will mate during the months of April, May and June. A pair will stay together for a week or two, actually copulating several times. Females bear a litter of one to three cubs, which become independent in one year. A mother bear may carry her young on her back when they are still small. A mother and her cubs employ a number of specific vocalizations in communicating with each other.

Conservation Status: The Andean bear is listed as vulnerable in the IUCN Red Data Book and as an Appendix I species under CITES. There are thought to be a few thousand left in the wild.

Threats to Survival: Habitat destruction and hunting are the two biggest threats to the spectacled bear. Though the hunting of spectacled bears is illegal, it continues to be poached. Its bones and fat are used for the local medicinal market and recently reports of poaching for gall bladders for the Asian market have been reported in Ecuador.

Zoo Programs: Approximately 71 bears are managed under the Andean Bear Species Survival Plan[®]. The Species Survival Plan works closely with the European EEP program which works with 52 bears in Europe and 6 in Russia. South American facilities have 33 bears while 3 are held in Japan. The Species Survival Plan is also working closely with zoos in Venezuela and Peru on management of bears in zoos and importing and exporting of new bloodlines. An Andean Bear Interest Group facilitates the exchange of information on South American facilities. An International Spectacled Bear Symposium held in Chicago in 1988 brought field biologists and zoo managers together for the first time. These contacts continue to be used to monitor the bear's population and programs in South America. Preliminary studies on the relationship between mother and cub have been completed in some zoos while ongoing research works on improving zoo diets.