



SLOTH BEAR

Phylum: Chordata; Class: Mammalia; Order: Carnivora; Family: Ursidae
Melursus ursinus

The Sloth bear is one of eight species of bears found throughout the world. Bears are found on every continent except Australia and Antarctica. The other seven species of bears are: the spectacled bear, the Asiatic black bear, the brown bear (including grizzlies), the polar bear, the sun bear, the sloth bear, and the giant panda. Koalas are sometimes referred to as 'koala bears', but they are marsupials, not bears.

How did sloth bears get their name? A member of the British Museum originally classified sloth bears as a member of the sloth family. In 1810, a live sloth bear was shipped to Paris, the species was re-classified as a bear, and the name changed to sloth bear.

Weight: 175-310 pounds. Males are generally heavier than females.

Body length: 5-6 feet

Height at the shoulder: 2½ - 3 feet

Lifespan: 20-30 years

Habitat: forests and grassland areas

Range: India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Sri Lanka



Status:

- Sloth bear populations are declining in the wild.
- Sloth bears are listed as **CITES Appendix I**. CITES, The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, is a United Nations treaty which provides a means for regulating international trade in wild animals and plants.

Threats to the survival:

- Sloth bear populations are declining due to **habitat loss** and **poaching for the medicinal market**.
- **Bear gall bladder** has been used by traditional Chinese doctors since the sixth century A.D. and is believed to help cure fever, intestinal, liver, and cardiac-related illnesses. Bear gall bladders have sold for as much as \$20 (U.S. dollars) per gram - that's more than the price of gold (WWF).

Diet in the wild:

- **Termites** make up a large portion of the sloth bear's diet. Sloth bears **will also eat** other insects, fruit and other plant material, honey, eggs, cultivated crops, and carrion (animals that are already dead).
- The sloth bear's **diet may vary** slightly with the seasons. In some areas, insects make up the majority of the bear's diet for a portion of the year, and fruits are relied on more heavily during the rainy season. There may also be variation in bear diets from area to area, depending on the length of the fruiting season in a particular region.

Special features:

- Sloth bears are **specially adapted for eating termites** and other insects. Sloth bears have very mobile snouts with lips that can be extended to form a tube for sucking up insects. The bears can close their nostrils voluntarily so they don't inhale dust or insects. The absence of the front pair of incisors forms a gap through which termites can pass.
- Bears have 5 digits on each limb and each digit has a claw. Sloth bears have **long, curved front claws** that are typically about 3 inches long. These long claws help them break open termite mounds and climb trees.
- The sloth bear has a **long shaggy, black coat**. It has a distinctive white-yellow V-shaped marking on its chest and a whitish colored muzzle. They also have a ruff of longer fur around their neck and shoulders.
- Some bear species go into a period of winter dormancy, sometimes referred to as hibernation. However, it appears that **sloth bears do not hibernate**. This is probably because they live in a warmer climate and food sources are usually available year-round.
- Sloth bear **predators** include: leopards, tigers, wolves, and the dhole (Indian wild dog).
- Two populations of sloth bears have been recognized: *Melursus ursinus ursinus* in India, Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh and *M. u. inornatus* in Sri Lanka.



Social organization & Behavior:

- **Little is known** about the social organization and behavior of sloth bears. Some research indicates that they are generally solitary and maintain small territories (AZA). Studies in Nepal indicated that while the bears displayed some territory marking behaviors such as clawing trees, individual bears usually did not react aggressively to other bears entering their marked area (Joshi).

Breeding & Care of Young:

- “**Females may breed first when 4 years old**, but do not necessarily produce cubs following their first breeding season.” (Joshi)
- **Mating** usually occurs between May through July. However, in Sri Lanka, sloth bears have been known to mate at all times of the year.
- Mating pairs form for only 1-2 days (AZA).
- **Gestation** = 6-7 months
- The gestation period includes time for the process of **delayed implantation**. After a successful mating and egg fertilization, the developing embryo stops developing and is not implanted in the uterus until later. Once implanted, the embryo resumes development.
- Cubs are usually born between late December and early January - during the dry season.
- A female sloth bear usually gives birth to **2 cubs**.
- The tiny cubs typically weigh only 11-18 ounces each and are kept in dens for protection.
- As the cubs grown older and gain strength, female sloth bears often **carry the cubs on their back**. They cubs hang onto the female’s long, shaggy fur.
- Cubs usually stay with their mother for 2-3 years.

Efforts to save sloth bears:

The American Zoo and Aquarium Association’s **SSPs** (Species Survival Plans) are special programs designed by a team of zoo and wildlife professionals to help sloth bears, and many other endangered species. The SSPs outline breeding plans, work to increase public awareness and education, help conduct research, and in some cases, organize programs to reintroduce captive-bred wildlife into secure habitats. The sloth bear at Rolling Hills are part of the SSP for the species.

