

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

SUN BEAR (Helarctos malayanus)



A Sun bear at the FREETHEBEARS Sanctuary, Phnom Tamao Wildlife Rescue Centre, Cambodia

1) What do they look like?

The Sun bear, also known as the Dog bear or Honey bear, is the smallest of all bear species. The Sun bear's body measures just over 1.0 to 1.5 metres. The maximum weight for a Sun bear is 80 kilos, however, the average adult male weighs around 75 kilos and adult females weigh slightly less. Sun bears have a short black coat with golden or white fur around their eyes and muzzle, and a U-shaped yellow or orange patch of fur on their chests. The muzzle is short and the ears are small and round. Sun bears' paws are large with hairless soles. The claws are long, curved, and pointed to help them climb trees.

2) What do Sun bears eat?

The Sun bear lives on a diet of termites, birds, and small mammals and also enjoys fruit, vegetables and honey which they lick with extremely long tongues. Sun bears in captivity will often be fed porridge, rice, and dog biscuits. Sun bears are naturally poor digesters, which is functional in the wild as their droppings contain seeds from fruits that they eat which are dispersed throughout the forest.

3) Why do Sun bears have such long claws?

Sun bears use their claws to grip trees and branches while they climb and they are perfect for digging. Digging is one of a Sun bear's favourite things to do and it also helps to keep soil on the forest floor healthy. Their powerful claws allow them to dig deep into soil to feed on roots and bulbs and protein rich insects and grubs. A Sun bear's claws are very strong and able to tear logs, bees' nests and termite mounds apart so that they can enjoy their favourite tasty treats.

4) Why do Sun bears have such big teeth?

In relation to their body size, Sun bears have the largest canines out of all the bear species. When a Sun bear is using their claws to climb a tall tree, their strong teeth and powerful jaws are equally useful for breaking and tearing open rotten logs or other tough materials to help the bear forage for food. Sun bears also use their teeth to warn off rivals and the Sun bear with the smallest teeth will usually back down from a challenge before a fight begins.

5) How did they get their name?



The golden U-shape on the Sun bear's chest is said to look like the rising sun and this is one of the Sun bear's most characteristic features.

6) Why do they have that chest marking?

The function of the Sun bear's chest marking has not yet been confirmed by research, however as all Sun bears have unique chest markings, it could be a way for individual bears to identify one another in the wild.

7) Where do Sun bears live?

Sun bears live in densely forested areas of Peninsular Malaysia, Borneo, Sumatra, Cambodia, Myanmar (Burma), Thailand and Indo-China. They are also reported to live in isolated areas of Southern China and as far as the border of India! They live high up in the trees and even make nests at the very top.

8) Do Sun bears live in groups in the wild?

No, Sun bears are naturally solitary and will only come together in the wild for mating. Sun bears need a lot of space to themselves and an adult male Sun bear has an individual range of over 2,000 hectares (that's around 2,000 football fields). A female Sun bear's range is around half of this as she will usually have cubs to care for.

9) Why do Sun bears need so much space?

Sun bears are naturally territorial and usually see other adult bears as competition for food and space. A benefit of Sun bears having a large range is that they can disperse seeds from their diet across a broader forest area, keeping the forest's biodiversity balanced.

10) What is a Sun bear's strongest sense?

Like all bears, Sun bears have an excellent sense of smell and navigate the world with their noses. They are constantly processing and exchanging 'scent information' across vast distances and this helps them to find food and mates, identify cubs and avoid danger. Sun bears are naturally curious and love to give everything a good sniff!

11) How well can Sun bears see?

Sun bears can see a range of colours as they are attracted to colourful tropical fruit in the wild. They have very good-short range vision, perfect for spotting insects on the forest floor to eat. However, Sun bears may not have very good long-range vision, as in the forest they would not usually be able to see beyond the trees.

12) What noises do Sun bears make?

Sun bears are very vocal and communicate with a series of noises. A nasal, chuckle-like sound indicates that they are curious, while a deep guttural moan lets other bears know to stay away from them or their food. Sun bears will often make lots of noise when they are anxious or hungry and they even make a humming sound when they are comforting themselves. They have big roars for such little bears!

13) Why do Sun bears have loose skin?



A Sun bear's loose skin helps it to wriggle out of the powerful jaws of natural predators such as tigers. When Sun bears fight or play with each other, they grab each other's loose skin with their powerful jaws and teeth. This is a lot less damaging to each bear than if they were to sink their teeth directly into teach others bodies. This is something important to remember if you ever wish to play fight with a Sun bear!

14) Do Sun bears hibernate?

There is no need for a Sun bear to hibernate as their natural habitat is the tropical Southern eastern regions of Asia, where fruit grows and trees blossom all year round. Bears only hibernate in colder regions when food becomes scarce in the winter months. The Sun bear definitely lives up to its name by thriving in hot, sunny places!

15) How long is a Sun bear's gestation period?

It is estimated that a female Sun bear is pregnant for a period between 90 - 240 days and will give birth to one to two cubs at a time.

16) How much does a new-born Sun bear cub weigh?

A new-born Sun bear weighs around 325 grams on average. That's around the same weight as a cup of tea!

17) How long do Sun bear cubs stay with their mothers in the wild?

A Sun bear cub will stay with its mother in the wild for up to 2 years. After this time, the mother will encourage the young Sun bear to forage for itself in the wild. A lot of Sun bear cubs are taken from their mothers too soon in the wild, which is dangerous for them as they need their mother's milk and more importantly, they need her to teach them how to be a Sun bear!

18) How fast can a Sun bear run?

A Sun bear can reach speeds of up to 30 - 35 km/ph. Their long forearms mean that their running style is more of a gallop, but they can run very fast when they are scared or excited for food!

19) When do Sun bears sleep?

Sun bears usually sleep for around 8 hours at night, just like an adult human would. They are active during the day, but they also love to snooze at any good opportunity.

20) How long do Sun bears live?

The average life-span of a Sun bear is estimated to be 20 - 25 years. However, this is not confirmed by research of wild Sun bears. Perhaps they could live even longer!

The aim of FREETHEBEARS is to protect, preserve and enrich the lives of bears throughout the world. Throughout Southeast Asia, FREETHEBEARS has set up sanctuaries for rescued bears and continues to campaign for an end to all bear cruelty and the protection of their natural habitat.