



Pandas



YOUR FIELD REPORT

ISSUE 29



When looking for famously shy pandas, the right camouflage gear helped photographer Staffan Widstrand blend into China's remote mountain forests



Hello!

Welcome to your latest giant panda update



Xu Qiang, regional programme head (Chengdu), WWF-China

For several months of the year, the giant panda's forest home is cloaked in deep snow. In this monochromatic world of shadows, dark tree trunks, and ice-white snow, the bear's distinctive black-and-

white patterned coat and secretive nature help it evade detection. Added to the precipitous mountain landscape, freezing weather and physically exhausting terrain, this makes spotting a wild panda extremely difficult, and photographing one almost impossible. But it's a challenge Staffan Widstrand, one of Sweden's leading wildlife photographers, embraced. Turn over to join him on his recent adventure seeking this elusive bear. 直到下次!

(This means 'until next time' in Mandarin!)



FIELD NOTES

The waiting pays off with a perfect photo of a wild giant panda

A GIANT MISSION

Photographing wild pandas isn't easy. It takes resilience, patience – and a lot of luck!

I've travelled the world taking photos of nature, but I've always dreamed of seeing a giant panda in the wild. Looking for these solitary bears is like looking for a needle in a haystack. They live in dense bamboo forests, high up in misty mountains, where they do little but munch on bamboo and doze. They're the hardest animals to find!

Baoxing County – the 'hometown of the giant panda' – is in the centre of Sichuan, and seemed the perfect place to look. There's a valley here that's thought to be home to around eight of these bears – a relatively high population density. And

from late February to early March, they're looking for mates, increasing my chances of an encounter. So I packed my camera gear and headed out to panda country...

Every day, my colleague and I headed up into the mountains before sunrise, trekking up and down some 15 kilometres until nightfall. It was below zero, but I love the cold – the frost makes everything more beautiful, and fresh snow creates a pristine canvas for telltale footprints.

On day one, a fleeting glimpse of a panda confirmed we were in the right place! Then it was simply a matter of putting in the hours and being prepared,

A lovely, fresh panda poo

Happy birthday, Staffan!

The frozen forest is beautiful but challenging



The breathtaking moment the panda stepped out onto the path ahead

camera always ready. A few days later, on my birthday, I found the best present: a big panda poo! It was so fresh it was still green, and nearby we saw footprints.

A moment to remember

Ten days into our trip a second panda appeared. We were walking through dense bamboo when it stepped out onto the path ahead, mere metres away. I was so ready I started taking photos before its paw even touched the ground. The panda paused and looked in our direction, sensing something (though our camouflage gear concealed us), before continuing its journey in typically unhurried panda fashion. I quickly checked my photos – the bear was in focus, its eyes were on me, and its coat was dusted with snow. I was happy.

Back at the hotel, my success became a shared joy. Local people are deeply proud of their national animal, and everyone from truck drivers to fellow guests recounted their own experiences of seeing pandas.

For me, the giant panda is living proof that conservation works. WWF has been working to protect pandas for over 40 years, reconnecting fragmented populations via wildlife corridors that enable the bears to roam. Thanks to your support, their partners can keep protecting the panda's frozen home. Thank you.

Staffan

The WWF logo was inspired by a giant panda named Chi-Chi from Baoxing County



Silver pheasant

CLOSE ENCOUNTER

While looking for pandas, I was almost run over by an Asiatic black bear twice the size of a panda! I was walking down a path in the forest when I heard a sound behind me. I whirled around and maybe five metres away a big black bear ran over the path and into the trees. It looked at me briefly and then was gone.

We also saw local wildlife such as red pandas, golden eagles, bearded vultures, colourful pheasants (above) and small birds such as parrotbills.

One of Staffan's wildlife sightings: an Asiatic black bear



PARENTING PANDAS

Raising a cub is a long-term challenge for a panda mother, who works hard to care for her tiny, helpless newborn

Few animals are as needy as a newborn giant panda – and looking after this rare little creature is a big ask for the mother. As with many species, the father is inevitably no longer in the picture – having mated, he swiftly departs, leaving the female to raise their offspring alone. In fact, the chances are that he'll never encounter his cub, as these bears live in the remote mountain ranges of western China and live a largely solitary existence.

Window of opportunity

An adult female becomes ready to breed in spring, in a single narrow window of fertility lasting for only two or three days between March and May every year.

Each panda has a well-defined home range, and marks its territory by various means, including rubbing secretions from its anal glands onto trees and rocks. (Male pandas might do a 'handstand' against a tree in order to leave their scent higher, fooling other bears into thinking they're bigger than they really are.)

When a female is ready to mate,

chemicals in those markings signal that she's receptive, attracting the attention of passing males. They may challenge each other for the chance to breed with her, while she waits out of reach, perhaps up a tree. When dominance is settled, the champion male will then stay close to the female and charge at any intruders, until the female is ready to mate.

Preparing for parenthood

After mating, gestation varies between 90 and 180 days, with the average pregnancy lasting 135 days. This wide variation occurs because the egg may float in the womb for some time before implanting. Some time between August and October, the female typically retreats to a quiet den in a hollow tree or perhaps a cave to give birth to a single cub. And that's when the real work begins.

A newborn panda is very far from giant. It weighs just 85-140g – not much more than 0.1% of the size of its mother – and is proportionally smaller than any other newborn mammals except marsupials.

The cub isn't just tiny but also blind and almost hairless. Keeping the minuscule

Pandas are born without their distinctive black-and-white markings, but the colouration appears within the first three weeks of life

TINY ARRIVAL

A panda cub is one of the smallest and least-developed newborns of any mammal – though, as yet, no one knows why they're so small



A female giant panda gives birth only about one month after a fertilised egg implants in her womb.



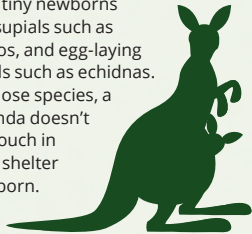
The newborn weighs just 85-140g – around the same as a pet cat's kitten and about 0.1% of its mother's weight.



The newborn's bones are relatively undeveloped, and the bony plates in the skull have yet to fuse.

Curiously, the tail is more prominent at birth, being about 5cm long – about a quarter of the newborn's length.

The only other mammals with similarly tiny newborns are marsupials such as kangaroos, and egg-laying mammals such as echidnas. Unlike those species, a giant panda doesn't have a pouch in which to shelter her newborn.



All bears have small cubs, but the giant panda's offspring are particularly tiny.



In almost any other mammal, a panda newborn would be considered premature. No one knows why they're born 'early'.

newborn tucked into her foreleg, beneath her chin or cradled in her body, the new mother also breathes on it to keep it warm. Indeed, she needs to do almost everything for her helpless offspring, at first using only her mouth rather than her less-sensitive paws to move it.

The cub squeals when hungry; after suckling, its mother licks it to stimulate the nerves that control urination and defecation – for the first few weeks it's unable to do either on its own.

Branching out

Things pick up quickly, though. By the

time it's three months old a cub's eyes are fully open, and around two months later it can begin to walk and climb. A couple of months later, it will start to nibble on solid food – bamboo – but cubs aren't fully weaned until they're between 18 and 24 months old.

Mum is still on hand for a while after that, though: the young panda will stay with her for up to three years, learning about life, before striking out on its own.

Devoted mother

It's no surprise that a panda mother invests so much effort in each of her

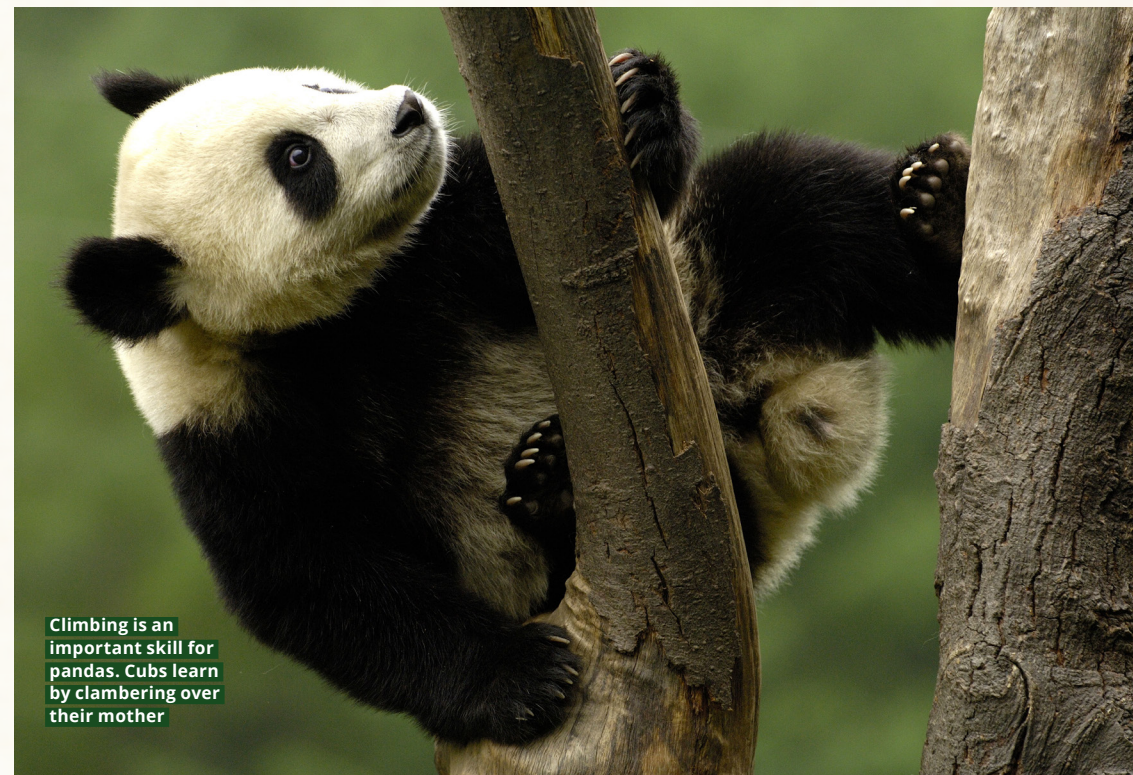
DID YOU KNOW?

Despite being such tiny newborns, pandas can grow to around 90kg as adults (up to 135kg for males). All fuelled by bamboo!

young. Female pandas are fully mature and able to breed from the age of about four or five, and normally give birth to one cub every two or three years. One female can have five to 10 litters in her lifetime. She needs to give each one the best chance of survival, devoting herself to their wellbeing for several years.

Yet despite this care and attention, not all newborns survive in the wild. This low survival rates and a

slow reproduction rate are some of the reasons why panda populations are taking a while to recover – and why your support is so important in safeguarding the future of each individual panda in the wild. ■



Climbing is an important skill for pandas. Cubs learn by clambering over their mother

MELTING POINT

Sea ice supports incredible wildlife at both poles, but it's disappearing before our eyes

Our planet's north pole is surrounded by a vast frozen sea. Life in the Arctic depends on this sea ice. Caribou migrate across it. Polar bears

use it as a platform from which to hunt seals. The algae that forms beneath its surface supports an ecosystem teeming with wildlife, including beluga whales and narwhals.

At the opposite pole, in Antarctica, emperor penguins need 'fast' (stable) sea ice to raise their chicks on, while beneath the surface, under the ice, krill breed in enormous numbers. These tiny, shrimp-like creatures are a cornerstone of the Southern Ocean's food web, providing food for everything from fish and seals to Adélie penguins and blue whales.

Sea ice also helps cool the planet as it reflects the sun's rays back into space. But greenhouse gases caused by human activities have raised temperatures globally,

which is having a huge impact in polar regions. Sea ice is forming later, breaking up sooner and becoming thinner – with devastating consequences for wildlife and for humankind.

In the Arctic, shrinking ice means polar bears are forced to spend more time on land, where hunting opportunities are limited. In Antarctica, four of the five known emperor penguin colonies in one area experienced breeding failure in 2022 when thousands of chicks died – the ice broke up before they'd grown their waterproof feathers. These and other polar species are facing an uncertain future.

It's vital that the average global temperature rise is kept below 1.5°C, otherwise the Arctic could be ice-free every summer by the middle of this century.

What happens next depends on the actions we take today to reduce carbon emissions. With your support, we're pushing for urgent global climate policies to keep warming in check.

DO ONE THING!

Cut your carbon

Try to increase the proportion of delicious plant-based foods in your diet



Antarctic sea ice is vitally important for all the wildlife living on, under and around it. From tiny krill to vast whales, their survival depends on keeping global warming under 1.5°C

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As well as helping to safeguard pandas, you support our other vital work to help protect our beautiful planet and its wildlife. Thank you.