

THE IBERIAN BROWN BEAR



The Iberian brown bear used to be present in large parts of Spain, however, it has suffered the same fate as so many other wild animals - it has been hunted almost to extinction, both for its fur and to stop it from attacking farm animals. As is the case for so many wild animals, the ever expanding presence of man has made it increasingly difficult for the brown bear to survive.

However, over the last couple of decades the population has finally started to increase again, although the danger is far from over.

The brown bear is, like man, a plantigrade, i.e. it supports its weight on its whole foot. Its weight varies greatly according to the time of year and the availability of food, the males' average weight is about 117 kg, the females' 93kg, although male bears have been found to weigh up to 200 kg. The bear's colour also varies, from almost black over various shades of brown to light beige.

The bears prefer to live in mountain forests, but do sometimes venture out onto open land in their quest for food. They are omnivores, but with definite vegetarian preferences. Their favourite food is blueberries, green vegetation, ants and, of course, honey, which they indulge in in spite of the fact that the bees attack them and sting them on their sensitive noses! They do also attack and devour the odd farm animal.

15-20 years ago there were only some 70 bears living in the wild in Spain, but thanks to interventions from the authorities the number has now grown to about 110. They live in two different areas in Northern Spain, covering parts of Castilla-León, Cantabria and Asturias. Due to their limited habitat and the small number of bears, inbreeding has become a problem, making it more and more difficult for the females to get pregnant. An attempt is being made to eliminate this trend by interchanging bears from the two areas.