

A female sloth bear forages on a rocky hillside in India's Daroji Bear Sanctuary, while her two cubs cling tightly to her back. The sloth bear is the only bear species to carry its young in this way.



Secrets of the **SLOTH BEAR**

THE EXPERT

AXEL GOMILLE is a German biologist, wildlife photographer and natural history author. He has written widely on Indian wildlife and was responsible for the German versions of many BBC natural history documentaries.



We recognise the sloth bear as 'Baloo' from *The Jungle Book*, but scientists hardly know this secretive species at all. **AXEL GOMILLE** is on a mission to learn more about the shadowy beast that haunts India's forests. All photos by Axel Gomille



The sloth bear has few enemies. When its stomach is full, it is laid-back and at peace with the world – just like Kipling’s Baloo.



A sloth bear prepares to use its mighty claws to tear open a termite mound.



The cubs did not appear to consider birds much of a threat.

The two male cubs encounter a peacock for the first time. The more adventurous of the two edges just ahead of his sibling.

THE SLOTH BEAR IS ONE OF the least studied large mammals on the planet, yet strangely, most of us have seen one. If you’ve ever watched the Disney animation of Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Book*, you will be familiar with the character Baloo, who was inspired by a sloth bear.

My parents took me to see the film when I was six years old, and though the adventures of Mowgli and his animal companions sparked a genuine interest in all Indian wildlife, laid-back, wise-cracking Baloo was my favourite.

Later, when studying biology, I got the chance to work as a naturalist in the famous tiger reserves of Kanha and Bandhavgarh in central India. Being in the forest every day gave me excellent opportunities to observe the large mammals living there – all except sloth bears, which proved extremely shy. Spotting a tiger was easy compared to getting even a glimpse of my Baloo. Usually, all I saw was a shaggy, dark shape

disappearing into the vegetation. I began to understand why there are so few images of sloth bears in the wild, and why so little is known about their way of life.

Since then, I’ve been trying to fill in some of the gaps. Recently, I spent several months

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sitting in a hide in Daroji Bear Sanctuary, in the south Indian state of Karnataka. It’s a small reserve, comprising just 56km², but is perfect sloth bear habitat. Its hills are strewn with rocks and boulders that create caves for the animals to shelter in, and umpteen groves of fruit-bearing trees provide plenty of

snacking opportunities.

But being in the right place at the right time is not enough – it also takes luck to see sloth bears. Kipling must have been smiling down on me and my mission – the area I’d chosen to stake out was frequented by a female sloth bear and her two cubs.

HUNGRY BEARS

Though sloth bears are typically active both at night and during the day, this mother was unusually busy in daylight. She was trying to find enough food to produce milk for her hungry offspring, and I enjoyed some great views of her busily foraging in the forest.

Sloth bears feed mainly on social insects such as termites and ants, which they Hoover up using their sensitive lips and tongues. Depending on the season, fruit also comprises a large proportion of their diet, and, of course, they can’t resist honey. The bears can be incredibly noisy eaters, sometimes revealing their presence with telltale sucking sounds.

My female was accompanied everywhere by her cubs. I suspected that they had only recently left the safety of their natal den, as they were still entirely dependant on their mother’s milk and protection, and rarely left her side.

At birth, sloth bears are tiny, blind and utterly helpless. They spend their first two to three months in hiding, during which time their eyes open. The first few weeks outside the den are a time of cautious exploration and great danger. If the cubs feel nervous, perhaps if there are tigers or leopards in the vicinity, they don’t seek refuge in trees, even though they’re already skilful climbers. Instead, they clamber onto their mother’s back and cling on until they feel safe enough to climb down again. It is only when they reach about nine months old that young sloth bears become too heavy for an adult female to carry.

It certainly didn’t take much for my cubs to go running to mum. Interestingly, though

they were both males, they had very different personalities. One was shy and rarely dared to leave his mother’s side, but the other was a bold adventurer, investigating every possible toy in the fascinating playground around him. When a mongoose emerged unexpectedly from a hole in the rocks, the shy guy hurried back to the female while his daring sibling stood his ground. But when a large male wild boar crossed their path, both cubs were equally terrified, scrambling onto their mother’s back as fast as they could.

The cubs did not appear to consider birds much of a threat. When a peacock passed by, the bolder youngster walked straight up to it. Even his faint-hearted brother seemed more comfortable with this sort of encounter, though he always followed a few steps behind.

Their mother never seemed particularly

concerned about the other wildlife that shared this part of the forest. Perhaps her sheer bulk was enough to protect her. She was even relaxed when meeting other sloth bears – provided they were females.

Very little is known about the social behaviour of sloth bears. During my weeks in the hide, I observed four females with cubs of different ages. Their home ranges seemed to overlap widely, and whenever they met, they showed no aggression towards each other. However, when an adult male turned up on the scene, the situation changed dramatically.

AN INTRUDER APPEARS

One day, I was watching another female and her two cubs, born the previous year and now much too heavy to ride on her back. The three animals were scrambling over a rocky slope when an old male appeared ►

DID YOU KNOW?

In the late 1700s, the first sloth bear pelts were sent from India to Britain. They were classified as sloths and called ‘bear sloths’. Only when a live animal was shipped to Europe in 1810 was the error corrected.



Despite their weight and clumsy appearance, sloth bears have long, strong claws and are nimble climbers.



A mother defends her yearling cubs against a rogue male. Though there are no confirmed records, infanticide in sloth bears seems likely.



A very young cub climbs onto its mother's back for safety.

at the foot of the hill. Though he was still some distance away, the mother immediately became very nervous. She didn't take her eyes off the intruder and paced up and down in agitation.

Then, all of a sudden, she rushed towards the male, roaring impressively and exposing her large canines. The yearlings followed close behind, keeping a low profile. It was a brave act – an adult female weighs about 75kg, but an average male is 50 per cent heavier and could easily overpower her in a fight.

But why was she so fearful and yet so determined? There are no confirmed records of infanticide in sloth bears, but the mother's reaction suggests that males do pose a threat to cubs.

In most cases, such a mock-charge is enough to settle an argument, but sloth bears are by no means

defenceless. In addition to their large canines, they possess long and powerful claws, which are typically used for foraging. Sun-baked termite mounds are hard as rock, but the bears crack them open with ease. Such tools can equally be used as lethal weapons – not only

All of a sudden, she rushed towards the male, roaring impressively and exposing her large canines.

against predators and other bears, but also against people.

Encounters between sloth bears and local villagers occur mainly in spring, when the mohwa tree comes into bloom. The bears seem to love the taste of its flowers, while humans harvest them to brew a delicious

drink. When preoccupied with feeding, the bears occasionally bump into unwary villagers, some of whom have been badly mauled. Since the bears have lost precious habitat to farming, they have also started to raid crops, such as sugarcane, sweet potato and peanuts, bringing them into conflict with locals. In these disputes, the bears usually come off worse.

Poaching is another huge problem. Sloth bears are killed for their gall bladders and other bodyparts, which are sold as dubious ingredients for eastern medicine, while females are shot and their cubs seized to be trained as dancing bears. Today, this practice is illegal, and any rescued individuals are cared for in special centres (see box, p56).

CHARACTER AND RESILIENCE

But it would be wrong to end my sloth bear story on such a sad note. It is the species' character and resilience that provide my most abiding memories, and one episode

in particular stands out. I was watching a female that I had never seen before – she had very young cubs, and this was probably the first time the family had ventured from the den. She hustled between the boulders looking for food, while her babies clung wide-eyed to her back.

Suddenly, the female tensed. There was something in the air – she could smell it. As I watched, a large male appeared in the distance. The mother was so startled that she rushed around to get a better view, accidentally dislodging one of her cubs. The surprised youngster screamed as it tumbled off her back, falling several metres down a small cliff before landing on a rock.

Realising what had happened, the female quickly scrambled down after him. The baby desperately tried to climb back onto his mother, but she was too nervous to stand still and constantly shifted position to check what

DID YOU KNOW?

Unlike other bear species that live in colder parts of the world, such as grizzlies and black bears, sloth bears do not hibernate. Since they inhabit warmer areas at lower elevations, they can forage year round.

the male was doing.

Getting a good grip is crucial for the cubs' survival – if this little guy couldn't grab its mother's fur, I feared the male would come after him. Finally, the cub managed to seize her leg, but before he had a chance to climb any further, the mother bolted for the safety of her den – with her youngster clinging on for dear life.

Somehow, the whole family made it back to the den, but I was

worried that the little guy was hurt – he could have sustained serious internal injuries. Fortunately, when I checked up on them a few days later, the female was calm and both cubs looked well. They even engaged in a little playfight as they rode on their mother's back. I was so relieved, and full of admiration for this tough little cub. He proves that Baloo is not only easy-going, he's also a born survivor.

FACTSHEET

SLOTH BEAR

Melursus ursinus

THE BASICS



- » **LENGTH** 150-180cm
- » **WEIGHT** 60-150kg
- » **DIET** Social insects such as ants and termites, and a variety of fruits, depending on the season.
- » **BREEDING** A litter size of two is most common. The cubs stay with their mother for up to two and a half years. Thus, breeding occurs at intervals of two to three years.
- » **HABITAT** Sloth bears live in a variety of habitats, including deciduous forest, grassland, thorn scrub and rocky hills, but avoid high elevations.
- » **DISTRIBUTION** Sloth bears are endemic to the Indian subcontinent. Historically, their range extended from the southern foothills of the Himalayas to Sri Lanka. Today, their distribution is patchy and corresponds roughly to areas with remaining forest cover.
- » **STATUS** Vulnerable (IUCN) due to poaching and severe habitat loss. The world population of sloth bears is not known due to lack of census data. Estimates range from 8,000 to 20,000 animals.

THE LOCATION

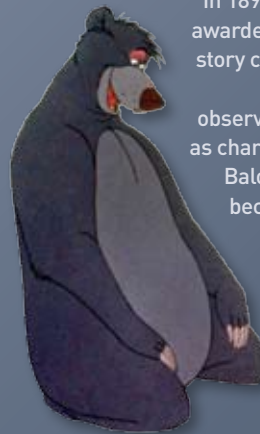
DAROJI BEAR SANCTUARY was created in 1994 and is situated 15km from Hampi, a World Heritage Site in the south Indian state of Karnataka. In addition to sloth bears, leopards, striped hyenas, jackals, mongooses and wild boar roam the area.



Sloth bear distribution (1990)

Daroji Bear Sanctuary

HOW THE SLOTH BEAR BECAME BALOO



In 1894, Rudyard Kipling, the first Englishman to be awarded the Nobel prize for literature, published his story collection *The Jungle Book*. Kipling was born in India and lived there for many years. A keen observer, he chose the wildlife species of the region as characters in many of his tales, and the sloth bear Baloo (taken from the Hindi word for bear: bhalu) became the teacher and protector of Mowgli, the 'man cub'. In 1967, Walt Disney produced the animated film *The Jungle Book*, based on Kipling's stories. Since the sloth bear was poorly known, some artistic freedom was involved when creating Baloo.

Disney's Baloo from *The Jungle Book* – famous for the song *Bare Necessities*.

Photos: i2Alamy

DANCING BEAR HORRORS

There is a long tradition of cruelty towards bears in India.

THE DANCING BEAR tradition in India dates back to the 16th century, when sloth bears were forced to dance for the entertainment of the ruling classes. Nowadays, the animals are used to beg for money from tourists.

Only young cubs can be trained to dance. To acquire them, their mothers are shot. The mortality of the babies is high, since they suffer from trauma and malnutrition. Before they reach one year, their teeth and claws are brutally removed to make them less dangerous to people.

Their spirit also has to be

broken. The cub's muzzle is pierced, which creates a terribly painful wound. No anaesthetics are used in the operation. Then a rope is pulled through the hole so the keeper can direct the animal. The bear only gets up on its hindlegs to avoid the pain.

THOUGH THIS CRUEL practice is banned by law, there is a lack of enforcement. The Indian charity Wildlife SOS seizes dancing bears and cares for them at several rescue centres, since they cannot be returned to the wild. More than 400 individuals have been rescued so far, but an estimated 500 are



A 'dancing' sloth bear with its handler, India.

still on the streets. International Animal Rescue from Sussex supports the activities of Wildlife SOS.

FIND OUT MORE

For more on dancing bears, visit www.wildlifesos.org or www.iar.org.uk