

# *Ursus arctos isabellinus*

No image

**Family:** Himalayan brown bear

**Common names:** Drinmor, Denmo (Ladakhi)

**Classification:**

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum: Chordata

Class: Mammalia

Order: Carnivora

Family: Ursidae

Genus: *Ursus*

Species: *arctos*

Subspecies: *U.a. isabellinus*

**Profile:**

The Himalayan brown bear (*Ursus arctos isabellinus*) is a subspecies of the brown bear (*Ursus arctos*). The dense, shaggy winter coat is lighter reddish-brown to silver-grey in colour. During summer the coat turns rich yellowish-tinged darker brown, with occasional pale V-shaped markings on the chest. Members of both the sexes look alike but the male is larger and heavier than the female and can weigh over 200 kg. Males are 1.5-2.2 m and the females are 1.37-1.83 m in length. Thus, the Himalayan brown bear is one of the largest animals in its range. The relatively small head has a pointed snout and small rounded ears. The second premolar is usually absent. The stocky limbs end in flat paws with long straight claws. The tail is a short stump. The animal can run at speeds of 50 km/h. Although extremely agile on the ground, it rarely climbs trees. Some think that the Himalayan Brown Bear could be the source of the legend of the Yeti.

**Lifespan:** 25-30 years

**Distribution:** The Himalayan brown bear is generally restricted to the alpine meadows and sub-alpine scrub zones above the tree line in the Himalayan regions of India and Pakistan. Generally the species does not extend beyond Dachigam and Kashmir. In India, it occurs in the states of Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand. During summer, the animal follows the snow-line up to 5500 m.

**Population:** The actual population of the bears is unknown. Around 20-28 animals have been estimated in the Deosai National Park, in Pakistan controlled Kashmir. Less than 100 individuals have been estimated in south and west Ladakh.

**Behaviour:** The species occurs singly or as small family groups (mother with cubs). Brown bears like to rest during the mid-day hours and hence, feed actively for 1-2 hours before sunrise and again in the late afternoon and evening. Food availability greatly influences the productivity and density of the animals. Thus, in food-rich areas, the individuals are larger and reproduce earlier. The Himalayan brown bears are territorial and the territory size also varies according to food availability. Male territories are larger (as much as 100 km<sup>2</sup>) and encompass several female territories. From November to May, the species enters a period of semi-hibernation in dug-out dens and rock caves. The hibernation period is intermittent as the animal may occasionally wake up and become active. Mating occurs during May-June when the pair remains together for a couple of weeks and then separate. However, the implantation of fertilized eggs is delayed till October. The cubs are born in January-February when the mother is hibernating. At birth, the cubs are small, almost hairless and completely helpless. By early summer, they are able to leave the cave with their mother in search of food. The cubs remain with the mother for 3-4 years, until she is ready to mate again. Apart from deep growls as a sign of aggression or during the mating season, the animal is generally silent. The Himalayan brown bear is known to be unpredictable and can be aggressive when threatened or when the individual is accompanied by cubs. Although wary of humans in general, the animal is often drawn towards campsites while scavenging for food.

- **Diet:** Himalayan brown bears are omnivores and their diet varies according to season. In spring and summer, its diet comprises of grass, bulbs, root, and other plants as well as insects and small mammals like rodents and pikas. They may also

predate on domestic livestock like goats and sheep, as well as scavenge on carrion. During late summer and autumn the animals come to the lower altitudes and feed on buckwheat and various fruits to accumulate fat for the winter hibernation.

- **Reproduction:** Mating season: May-June; Birthing season: January-February; Gestation period: 210-240 days; Litter size: 1-2, rarely 3; Sexual Maturity: 4.5 years (both males and females)

#### **Current status:**

- **Status:**
  1. IUCN 2008: Least Concern (assessed for the entire species of *Ursus arctos*)
  2. CITES 2008: Listed in Appendix I
- **Threats:**
  1. Habitat fragmentation due to various developmental activities.
  2. Poaching of the animal for its skin, fats and other body organs for use in traditional medicines.
  3. Trapping of bear cubs by gypsy tribes who train them for dancing and circus shows. Often the mother is killed during the capture of the cubs.
  4. Killed by humans to reduce livestock depredation.
  5. With a very small percentage of their habitat falling within protected areas, the Himalayan brown bear is inadequately protected by legal institutions.
- **Conservation practices:**
  1. The Himalayan brown bear is protected as a 'Schedule I' species in the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act of 1972.
  2. In 1993, a study was conducted in the bear-inhabited Deosai Plateau in Pakistan controlled Kashmir, following which Deosai was designated as a National Park.
  3. TRAFFIC- India monitors the trade of this species and its products.
  4. In India, the Forest Departments have started paying compensation for livestock kills, as well as human injury and death by brown bears.
  5. There is an urgent need for the IUCN to assess the subspecies of *Ursus arctos isabellinus* separately and not as a part of the species *Ursus arctos* in order to obtain a true picture of its present status.