



## BEAR

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**BEAR**, Pers. *ķers*, Av. *arša-*. Two varieties of bears are found on the Iranian plateau: the Eurasian brown bear and the Baluchistan black bear (Figure 1).

1. Eurasian brown bear (*Ursus arctos*). The Eurasian brown bear is the most common of all bears. Its distribution includes the Pyrenees and Alps, Scandinavia, Transylvania, Siberia, parts of the Middle East, the higher levels of Waziristan, northwestern and central Himalayas, Tibet, Mongolia, Szechwan, Kamchatka, and Japan. The largest population inhabits the vast coniferous taiga of the USSR.

The brown bear is found throughout the forested areas of western and northern Iran away from the desert areas. Although predominantly found in forests, it also utilizes both the steppe and treeless mountainous areas, especially in spring. It is replaced in south-central and southeastern Iran by the Baluchistan black bear (see below) where the terrain is more barren and inhospitable. The brown bear varies in color from pale-yellow to dark-brown. Those in the Zagros mountains are paler, frequently with white on the shoulders or chest, and probably represent the form *U. a. syriacus*, or Syrian brown bear, a small pale form which is considered endangered and may be extinct outside Iran.

Bears have a comparatively short digestive tract, and do not digest fibrous vegetation well. As a consequence, they are highly selective in what vegetation they eat, choosing that which contains high amounts of energy or protein such as berries, acorns, tubers, buds, and mushrooms. They are omnivores, eating



grubs, small rodents, fish, and whatever larger animals they can opportunistically catch, such as newborn fawns, and domestic livestock; they also take carrion.

Ovulation is induced by mating after a brief courtship. In the brown bear the fertilized egg does not implant and develop for 5 or 6 months. The young are born naked and helpless. Litter sizes vary between one and four, with two being most common. Nutritional factors determine the age at which a female gives birth, litter size, and interval between litters.

Home ranges vary enormously, sometimes by an order of magnitude. Adult males are solitary and have ranges that commonly include several females and overlap with other males. Adult females, by contrast, tend to have mutually exclusive home ranges and exclusive access to forage. What evidence exists suggests that the brown bear hibernates throughout its range in Iran, in caves, hollow bases of trees, or other similar such shelters.

2. Baluchistan black bear (*Selenarctos thibetanus*). The Baluchistan or Asiatic black bear is easily distinguished from the Iranian brown bear (see above) by its black color, white chest, tufted ears, and smaller size. The Baluchistan black bear usually does not exceed 150 kilograms in weight, while the brown bear may weigh in excess of 250 kilograms. It was formerly distributed in Pakistan and Afghanistan and the same species is found in all Himalayan countries, where it is referred to as the Himalayan black bear. Its distribution extends eastwards into Burma, the Malayan peninsula, Indo-China, Manchuria, Korea, and Japan.

Black bears have been reported to come into conflict with man's needs: In the Himalayas they are known to sometimes kill sheep, goats, and cattle, and in Japan they cause serious damage to forest plantations by feeding on bark.

The black bear's distribution in Iran was little known until 1973 when biologists of the Department of Environment found a small population of perhaps 50 to 100 animals living in the Jiroft mountains of central Iran. Its primary diet would appear to be wild pistachio nuts when in season, based on the number of bear scats containing pistachio shells found in caves within the region. It also raids bee hives. Some of the scats found consisted entirely of bee carapaces. Depredations on human resources were not uncommon. Some local residents complained of bears taking dates, oranges, and occasional stock.



Efforts to map out the bear's distribution in Iran eastwards to Pakistan, from where it must have immigrated, revealed a second population, numbering perhaps as few as a half dozen animals along the Sarbāz river near the Pakistani border. Here living conditions were extremely harsh, which, coupled with heavy dependency on the few isolated orchards, indicated that the bear's future was problematical. Villagers inhabiting the less barren, previously scrub-forested region between the Sarbāz river and the Jiroft mountains spoke of the bear's existence prior to the area being extensively cultivated.

Bear signs found in more than a dozen caves in the Jiroft mountains would suggest that the bear hibernates in winter although it may also become dormant during the hottest weather, or at the very least lie up during the day. Evidence for this is based on fresh seats and the occasional bear being found within caves during the hot season.

Litter sizes are said to consist usually of one or two. The cubs stay with the females for about two years.

Continued survival of the remaining population of Baluchistan black bears depends upon preservation of its current habitat.

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