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Red Pandas

When most people hear the word “panda,” I bet they imagine a large black and white bear. But, did you know, the giant panda was not the first panda to be discovered? The red panda was discovered in 1825, over 50 years before the giant panda was first described by scientists.

While these two species share a similarity in their name, they are not related. Genetic testing has shown that the red panda and giant panda are from separate families. Giant pandas belong to the family Ursidae, which means that they are bears. While the family group of giant pandas is well established, there were many questions as to how red pandas should be classified. In the debate of the relationship of red pandas to other species, they were once thought to be related to bears and at another point to raccoons. Science has revealed that red pandas are the only living species of the family Ailuridae. While giant and red pandas belong to different family groups, their similar diet could have caused people to think they were related.

Both the giant and red pandas eat bamboo. While the giant panda relies totally on bamboo for nourishment, red pandas enjoy a little more variety, eating fruit, grubs, grasses, and sometimes small animals. Pandas are closely tied to the bamboo forests of their native habitat in China, and in the case of red pandas, Nepal and northern Burma as well. Without these forests for shelter and food resources, their survival has become threatened.

In 2015, red pandas moved from being listed as vulnerable to endangered. The reason that The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species changed their listing was due to scientific research indicating that red panda population has declined by at least 50% in the last three generations, and this trend shows no signs of slowing down. This population decline is due to multiple factors including habitat loss or fragmentation, diseases like canine distemper, and hunting.

Here at Lee Richardson Zoo, our red pandas participate in the Association of Zoos and Aquariums Species Survival Plan. This means that our two adult red pandas, Charlie and Ember have a breeding recommendation in the hopes that their offspring can contribute to the

survival of the red panda species. Charlie and Ember have been successful participants in the Species Survival Plan in the past, and this year, on August 12<sup>th</sup>, Ember gave birth to three cubs. With the birth of a new litter of red panda babies at our zoo, we have extra reasons to celebrate at this year's International Red Panda Day event.

This Sunday, the 17th, Lee Richardson Zoo will be celebrating International Red Panda Day with an event to highlight this endangered species. The family-friendly event will be from 1 pm- 3 pm in front of the Wild Asia main entrance. Join us for fun crafts including a red panda coloring page and creating your own red panda origami. Don't forget to test your bamboo gathering ability at the activity station. In this obstacle course, you can test how fast you can gather food from the bamboo forest. But watch out, because as the forest is cleared for lumber or space, it might be harder to find food. There will also be a face painting station, so guests can show their red panda pride by having their face painted. Discovery Carts will be set up for inquiring minds to ask questions of zoo volunteers, have an opportunity to take a closer look at red pandas, and find out more about efforts to save their species. At 1:30 pm, there will be a Keeper Chat at the red panda habitat where guests will have the opportunity to talk with the staff who care for our red panda family. Join us for a wild time at the International Red Panda Day event from 1 pm- 3 pm on the 17th.