

Conservation News

Tibetan brown bear recorded in Chagthang, Ladakh, India





Four species of bear occur in India: the Himalayan brown bear *Ursus arctos isabellinus* and Asiatic black bear *Ursus thibetanus* in the Himalayan mountain ranges, and the sloth bear *Melursus ursinus* and sun bear *Helarctos malayanus* in the tropical forest areas of the north-eastern hill states and in peninsular India. All four species are categorized as threatened on the IUCN Red List because of increasing threats throughout their range, including habitat fragmentation, low population densities, illegal killing, human–bear conflicts and climate change. They are all protected under Schedule I of the Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972 in India, and are listed in Appendix I of CITES.

The Himalayan brown bear is the largest carnivore in the high-altitude regions of the Indian Himalayan states of Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Jammu and Kashmir Union Territory, and Ladakh Union Territory (Mukherjee et al., 2021, *Science of the Total Environment*, 142416), and there are no reports of the subspecies further north or north-east of Kargil and Drass in Ladakh, India.

Following incidents of human–wildlife conflict involving large mammals not seen before in the Changthang region, the Department of Wildlife Protection of Ladakh deployed camera traps in the area. Because of the presence of snow leopards, the Changthang is one of the most studied landscapes in Ladakh, and although extensive camera trapping and field surveys have been conducted, there are no previous

reports of brown bears. We deployed eight camera traps in Kyungyam village in the Nyuma Wildlife Range, Changthang, where local people had reported the sightings of an unfamiliar, large, bear-like species. Three of the eight camera traps captured images of an individual bear: on 22 June 2024 at 23.57 and on 23 June 2024 at 0.24 and 0.49. We carefully examined the images and, based on distinguishing characteristics including coat colour and the irregular-shaped white or light collar and pale stripe along the lateral side of the body, we identified the species as the Tibetan brown bear *Ursus arctos pruinosus*.

This finding is of considerable conservation importance as it expands our knowledge of this subspecies' range, previously thought to be limited to the Tibetan Plateau and parts of China. The occurrence of the Tibetan brown bear in this landscape could be a result of historical or current population expansion, long-range dispersal, climate change or the availability of new habitats. This finding underscores the need for systematic camera trapping in the region to investigate the Tibetan brown bear population and implement appropriate management and conservation actions.

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Camera-trap images of a Tibetan brown bear *Ursus arctos pruinosus* in Changthang region, Ladakh Union Territory, India. Distinguishing features include: dark fur colour and broad white collar around the neck (a-d), a prominent white mark on the lateral side of the body (b & d) and black fur on the legs and feet (d).