

In the Market for Bears

Sy Montgomery

Asiatic Black Bear

Writer and National Public Radio commentator Sy Montgomery shares this chapter from her book Search for the Golden Moon Bear, Science and Adventure in Pursuit of a New Species (Simon and Schuster, 2002). Traveling to Cambodia with Gary J. Galbreath, Ph.D., professor of evolutionary biology at Northwestern University, the two embark on a remarkable journey looking for Cambodia's elusive golden moon bear.

As we pull over at the market at Kampong Som—a street fragrant with French bread and roasting swallows, crammed with wedding dresses, live lobsters, chain saws, flyswatters, cooking pots—our Toyota is thronged with children trying to sell us snails and clams. Our companion, Sun Hean, chats in Khmer with a pregnant woman in a blue pantsuit. Does she know where we might find a moon bear?

The name of the animal evokes the luminous night. Its original Latin moniker—*Selenarctos thibetanus*—honors Selene, the Greek goddess of the moon, because of the white crescent mark on the animal's chest. Otherwise, the moon bear, big and shaggy, with prominent, round, upright ears, and often, a thick mane like a lion's, is black as the tropical night—and as mysterious.

Rudyard Kipling called it “the most bizarre of the ursine species.” It doesn't look like it belongs in the tropics. In fact, the first specimen described by science came from the foothills of the snowy Himalayas. Though moon bears are found from northeastern Russian and China to



Afghanistan, they are little studied. Not until the 1960s did scientists realize these dark, heavy beasts, panting beneath their thick coats, padded through the heated, steamy stillness of Cambodia's jungles.

Yet in the same forest where grasses grow into trees one hundred feet high and banyons spill curtains of hair-fine aerial roots from treetops, the moon bears of the Himalayas scratch and snuffle. At dawn and dusk, they shift like shadows among gingers and bamboos. Their imprint is unmistakable. On the straight-boled, spotted trunks of bee trees, they carve their five-fingered signatures with black, recurved claws. In the crotches of tropical oaks, they break tree limbs to create springy resting platforms for their up to 325-pound bulk. In glossy monsoon soils, they leave their footprints. With five rounded toes and a long heel pad on the back foot, their footsteps look like those of giant humans.

But you could spend years exploring these tangled rain forests and never see a moon bear. Instead, you would find them, as we did, caged in back of tourist hotels, chained outside of city pharmacies—and at markets like this one.

The pregnant woman doesn't ask what two young, well-dressed Cambodians, a sunburned blonde, and an American professor might want with a moon bear. She is an animal dealer. She knows that here in Cambodia, people buy bears for many reasons. They are treasured as household pets and kept as roadside attractions. They are sold for their meat and for their teeth. People eat their paws in soup and use their gall for medicine.

What *we* want from a moon bear, though, is stranger than the woman could possibly imagine. We want only to pluck out, with my eyebrow tweezers, a few of its hairs.

We already have a small zoo of hairs tucked in vials inside the professor's camera case. Each vial holds the genetic information of a bear captured from a different, known site. It is not the hair, per se, but its base, the living cells of the bulb, that contains the information we seek.

After we return to the States, a laboratory in Idaho will extract from these specks of flesh the genetic information contained in each bear's DNA, and compare them.

In this way, we hope to document what could be the first new bear species to be reported in over a century.

But in order to do so, we need the hair of a black moon bear who has been captured in this province, a bear from the fragrant, misty forests of the Elephant Mountains.

The animal dealer says she *had* a moon bear for sale—but just that morning she'd sent it to Phnom Penh. For what? I ask Sun Hean. "For pet. For restaurant. I don't know," he answers. But the dealer does confirm that the bear had come from the rain-forested slopes of the Elephant Mountains. And there will be more where it came from.

Two mountain systems comprise most of the wilderness left in mainland Southeast Asia: with the adjoining Elephant Mountains and Cambodia's highest peak, Phnom Oral, the Cardamom range, occupying much of western Cambodia, huddles in the shape of a Q beneath a cloak of monsoon clouds. The rainfall here is the highest in Cambodia, and the jungles the most dense. The spice-scented forests harbor creatures beautiful, deadly, and ancient: clouded leopards, with spotted coats soft and thick as mist; tiny primitive deer called muntjacks, their upper jaws curiously spiked with fangs. There are more tigers here than anywhere else in the country, and possibly, more wild elephants than anywhere else in Indochina. In similar habitat in neighboring Vietnam, scientists discovered in 1989 fresh tracks of the Javan rhinoceros species thought extinct on the mainland for nearly half a century; some think it might yet survive here, too.

The other, wildest mountains are the Annamites. In a great igneous spine, they run for more than six hundred miles from the northeastern corner of Cambodia up along the border of Vietnam and Laos. A mosaic of rain forest, dry evergreen woods, cypress and old-growth pine, the



Annamites preserve, in the words of the great American wildlife conservationist George Schaller, “a living lost world.” Four hundred species of birds have been cataloged here, a count only cursory. Of the roughly dozen large mammal species discovered in the world since 1900, nearly half of them—including a two hundred-pound antelope with spear-like horns, a giant, barking deer, and a zebra-striped rabbit—have been found, since 1992, in the Annamites.

Eventually our quest will lead us into both these mountain jungles. But before we would step into that wild and leafy realm, we would need to search its looking-glass

opposites: private zoos, hotel menageries, and noisy, crowded streetside markets.

In Kampong Som, it appears that most of the wildlife is destined for the dinner plate. Along the street, where dentists advertise their services with large paintings of white, extracted teeth, a beautiful young woman, her hair tied up neatly beneath a conical hat, tends a charcoal fire over which skewered bats are roasting. In a pink plastic bowl beneath a dome of woven rattan, live frogs, tortoises, and cobras await the soup pot. In the palm oil of a neighboring vendor’s wok, three-inch grasshoppers sizzle.

“Is there any animal that people don’t eat here?” I asked Sun Hean.

He thought for a moment. “The vulture,” he answered solemnly.

The scent of pigs’ blood mingles with the fragrance of temple marigolds. To be looking for a new species here seems irreconcilably absurd.

But it is no more unlikely, really, than the way our expedition had begun.

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The route that led to the market in Kampong Som was circuitous, winding from China to the Amazon, from Hancock, New Hampshire, to Bangkok, Thailand. I had come to Cambodia thanks to extraordinary coincidences and extraordinary people.

Dr. Gary J. Galbreath was one of them. A professor of evolutionary biology at Northwestern University and a research associate of the famous Field Museum, Gary had been president of the Chicago-based Rainforest Conservation Fund when it took on funding the Tamshiyacu-Tahuayo Community Reserve in Peru in 1991. We met there in 1997 when I was researching a book on the Amazon's pink river dolphins.

"Did you know," Gary asked me as our boat chugged up the tea-colored river, "this place used to be full of giant, carnivorous Terror Birds?"

No, I did not. This he quickly remedied.

"They were feathered dinosaurs, essentially, long after the dinosaurs went extinct," he began. "It's possible a human being even saw one. They were the dominant predators in South America during the Age of Mammals. The Terror Birds even made it to Florida—to Daytona Beach! They found some fossils there. But only twenty months ago their *arms* were found—and it turns out they weren't winged like we thought."

This modest, green-eyed, middle-aged professor had me mesmerized.

"They had evolved tearing arms, with two fingerlike projections to grab their prey," he continued. "The fingers are fused bones, like the panda's thumb. Terror Birds began to decline when dogs, cats, and bears came down from North America, three million years ago or so. And if that didn't do them in, then people came eleven to thirteen thousand years ago and killed off their prey, the giant ground sloths and zebras . . ."

I was next surprised to learn that zebras arose in North America; that horses are more closely related to dogs than pigs; that a friend of his had shot for dinner, and thus discovered, a new species of pig, the sweet-smelling Chacoan peccary, and that, as a graduate student, Gary had acquired a pair of armadillos who liked to sleep with him in his bed. But I was not surprised to learn—much later and from another biologist—that at Gary's last lecture of the year, his students gave him a standing ovation.



After each day's fieldwork, when the others' talk often turned to jobs or family, photography or politics, Gary and I would take a canoe out on the dark waters of the Tahuayo and talk about animals and evolution.

It was on one of those starry, timeless nights that he told me about the golden moon bear.

Gary had been a delegate of the American Society of Mammalogists for the group's first official meeting with its Chinese counterpart in Beijing, back in 1988. Afterward, he had traveled south, to explore the tropical rain forest of Yunnan Province with a small contingent of other biologists.

"We were in this little town in Yunnan called Simao. My friend, Penny, called me over. She said there was something I should see. And there, in this little cage—it was sort of like a town mascot, and taking peanuts, very gently, from people's hands—was this young male bear, maybe ninety kilos, with tall, round ears and a white V on the chest. But what was remarkable was, its coat was golden. I had never seen anything like it."

In fact, Gary was stunned. The biologist was facing a creature he could not identify.

Quickly, he sorted through his encyclopedic zoological memory. There were only eight known species of bear on Earth. Obviously this was not a polar bear, or a panda. Nor was it an American black bear—although "black bears" can be brown, cinnamon, blond, or even white, the ears on this animal were too big for an American black bear. It couldn't be a spectacled bear, a native of South America's Andean highlands. It looked nothing like one, having a longer snout than this short-faced bear, and lacked the circular white markings around the eyes that make the spectacled bear look like it is wearing glasses.

Besides the panda, four other bear species are known in Asia. Sun bears—named for the patch, often sunrise orange, on the chest—barely range into tropical Yunnan. But this clearly wasn't one. Sun bears, the smallest and most tree-loving of bears, have inconspicuous ears, short, jet

fur, long claws, and huge, stout canines. Nor was this a sloth bear, also known from Asia's tropics—it has masses of fluffy, messy, black hair, unusually mobile lips, with which it sucks termites out of their hills like a vacuum hose, and nostrils it can slam shut to keep termites from crawling in. The only Asian bear with a coat that ever comes close to blond is the brown bear, the same species (although a different subspecies) as the American grizzly. But it is unknown from the tropics. The only Asian bear with big ears like this was a moon bear—but Gary had never heard of one with a golden coat.

He took photos, and so did his friend and colleague, physician Penny Walker. “I was photographing it in case it wasn't known,” he said. “But what were the chances of my discovering a new bear? For all I knew, someone in the literature long ago described a blond bear like this.”

The next day, at the Kunming natural history museum, Gary looked through the collection of moon bear skins. All of them were black. But during China's Cultural Revolution, all the specimens' tags were destroyed, so he had no idea where they came from—or even whether moon bears had ever before been recorded living in Yunnan.

“It was enough to excite interest,” he said. “This was of potentially significant biological import.” Variation in coat color is important to document, Gary explained; one of the biologist's principal tasks, after all, is to describe the natural world. An unreported color phase in an existing species is an exciting finding, akin to making the first reports of a black panther (which is a dark form of the normally black-and-gold spotted leopard) or a white tiger (a pale-coated form of the Royal Bengal tiger). But the golden bear could be a discovery far more spectacular. Gary knew from his postdoctoral work on New World owl monkeys that, in the absence of genetic analysis, coat color alone can serve as a way—sometimes the only way—to tell different species apart. If the golden bear represented a new species, it would be the scientific finding of a lifetime—the first new bear reported since the panda more than a hundred years



before. “This could be a major biological discovery,” Gary realized. “But I was telling myself, I’m sure these things were known . . .”

When he returned from China, Gary made an exhaustive search of the scientific literature. He checked explorers’ accounts of zoological expeditions throughout Asia. He laboriously translated manuscripts from French and German. He discovered only one account of a bear from Southeast Asia that wasn’t black—a 1906 report of a young male bear with brown hair tipped with gray. Secured from an animal dealer, it was said to have come from the Shan States of upper Burma and thought to be a kind of grizzly. It was tentatively given the subspecies name *Ursus arctos shanorum*. There was no mention of a blond bear. Anywhere.

Gary had always wanted to go back to Simao and find out more, he told me. But his demanding teaching load at Northwestern was compounded by his administrative duties as associate director of the undergraduate biology department. Besides, what were the chances that bear was still there? Several times, he had started to write up an account of the golden bear for scientific publication, then abandoned the idea. “This was just one specimen. It could have been a mutant individual—not a new color phase, not a new species, not anything.”

Still, the image of that bear stayed with him for nine years. Like a siren, it beckoned him, nagged him, teased. He could not forget it—but he did not see how to pursue it, either: “There was only one,” he said, “just one, weird bear.”

Or so we thought—until one year later, when I met Sun Hean.

At a birthday party in the small New Hampshire town where I live, a friend brought a guest whose power and importance went largely unappreciated by the others. Shy and unsure of his English, with a round, boyish face, Sun Hean looked like a foreign graduate student, which he was. But he was also, although still in his twenties, the deputy director for the Wildlife Protection Office of Cambodia—the equivalent of the second in command of the United States’ Fish and Wildlife Service.

I asked him about bears. Had he ever heard of a bear in his country that wasn't black?

His dark eyes widened. Yes—in fact, a member of his staff had just sent him photographs of a strange bear. It was the color of gold.

It was living in a cage just east of Kampong Som, the captive of a wealthy palm oil plantation owner. Sun Hean was fascinated by it; he didn't know what it was. Cambodia had two known species of bear, the sun and the moon bear. This one, with its mysterious golden coat, looked to him like neither.

I arranged for Sun Hean and Gary to meet. I, too, flew to meet Sun Hean at the University of Minnesota, where he was next sent for graduate studies as part of the Fulbright scholarship that had brought him to the United States. The two men compared their photographs of different animals, taken a thousand kilometers and eleven years apart. They were virtually identical.

We began to plan our expedition.

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Few travel guides were available for Cambodia. The country was usually included in larger volumes mostly devoted to the safer and more alluring Thailand, or sometimes with Vietnam and Laos. The sections on Cambodia did not begin on a hopeful note. *Travelers' Companion* noted that the Phnom Penh English-language newspaper, *Bayon Pearnick*, carried helpful articles for visitors, such as “Keeping Your Head While Losing Your Wallet,” and a story on the latest public safety effort, the designation of February 24 as National Mine Awareness Day. (In the 1980s, the government had also declared a National Hate Day, setting aside May 20 as a day for everyone to reaffirm his hatred of former Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot.)

Cambodia is the most heavily mined country on earth, with four to eight million land mines, according to one estimate—at least one land mine for every man, woman, and child still left alive when the Khmer



Rouge were overthrown in 1979. The Communist forces had seeded fields and forests with explosives, fashioned from 60-mm and 82-mm mortar shells and from sections of iron water pipes stuffed with TNT, sugar, fertilizer, and shrapnel. These were supplemented with Chinese pressure mines, small as a lady's compact but capable of blowing off a leg. They were hung from bushes, buried along paths, placed near wells, at riverbanks and around fruit trees—anywhere people would go. As a result, 1 in 236 Cambodians is an amputee. An Australian Red Cross doctor called the one-legged man “the most obvious characteristic of national identity.” Some thirty-five thousand of Cambodia's citizens have lost a limb to a land mine, and according to the reports we read, another three hundred to seven hundred more injuries were being added to the list each month.

Compounding the injuries from land mines was the fact that doctors could do little to help. Cambodia had no decent medical care, we read. Foreigners who get hurt or sick in Cambodia are advised to evacuate to Bangkok. Most of Cambodia's doctors were killed by the Khmer Rouge, who also destroyed most of the hospitals. Those who remain have no pharmaceuticals. The local life expectancy listed in our guide was 40. “According to this, we should both be dead already!” Gary noted when he read the statistic.

In his thorough manner, Gary had searched for travel information before we departed that summer. He had printed out, among other things, a report on Cambodia by the Control Risk Group Ltd., which prepared what it touts as up-to-the-minute online advisories for business travelers. In June 1999, it rated Cambodia thus:

Political Risk Rating: *high*

Security Risk Rating: *high*

Travel Risk Rating: *high*

In the mid-nineties, the Khmer Rouge had been the main safety concern for foreigners in Cambodia, as the infrequent Western visitor was an easy

target for terrorists. In 1994, the Communist rebels had kidnapped, in two separate incidents, four Britons, an Australian, and a Frenchman, three of whom were tourists. All were later murdered.

But by the time we were planning our travels, Sun Hean had assured us the Khmer Rouge were “no problem.” When we had met in Minnesota, he had mapped out our route: from Phnom Penh, we would drive west, through the Elephant Mountains, to Kampong Som. We would then take a ferry to Koh Kong, and further explore the Cardamom range.

“Road travel outside cities is not recommended,” Gary read to me from his risk report—not only because of land mines, but also because of antigovernment guerrillas. The Communist guerrillas’ field forces had swelled to eighteen thousand in the early 1990s, and supplied with Chinese weapons, were said to be concentrated at our destination—the Cardamom Mountains. And the road to the port of Kampong Som, the report said, was potholed and thronged with bandits.

I had heard about the bandits. “Government soldiers, as well as Khmer Rouge rebels, sometimes resort to highway robbery,” I read to Gary from a 1996 travel guide. “Bandits regularly hold travelers at gunpoint as they point torches into the eyes of long-distance taxi drivers—who now build the extortion money into the cost of a trip.”

“The bandits might take our money,” Gary resolved, “but they’re not getting our bear hairs!”

Later, we found Cambodia listed in the 2000 edition of *The World’s Most Dangerous Places*. “Don’t be fooled,” wrote its author, Robert Young. “With the demise of the Khmer Rouge, the violence simply doesn’t make as many headlines.” A pamphlet that the United Nations-sponsored peacekeeping unit had issued its soldiers and workers in 1992 contained Khmer phrases Young felt would be still useful to travelers today:

“That’s a very nice gun, sir. I’d be honored to give you the gift of my truck.”



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We got a good deal on air ticket from Korean Air Lines—no doubt because we would fly roughly the same route that the ill-fated KAL Flight 007 had plotted before it was shot down over Kamchatka in the 1980s. Surely every passenger on board had the same thought as we watched the map on our personal video screens showing our plane skirting Russian airspace—all except Gary. “Look,” he said cheerfully. “We’re flying over Kamchatka—where the really giant bears live!”

For thirteen hours, on our flight from Chicago to Seoul, and then on the five-hour flight from Seoul to Bangkok, we talked bears.

“According to Ognev,” he said, citing the great Russian zoologist, “there are two kinds of grizzlies on the Kamchatka Peninsula: one the size of the American grizzly, the other the size of a Kodiak.” These bears were giant enough—an American grizzly can weigh 700 pounds, and a male Kodiak, 1,800 pounds. But there could be a third, even larger. Siberian hunters claim that *Arctodus*-like bears may also survive there—bears twice the size of a Kodiak.

Arctodus simus, the giant short-faced bear, was the largest terrestrial carnivore that ever lived. On long legs, it raced after zebras, camels, and bison and brought them down with a bite from canines larger than a leopard’s. It would have been far swifter than a grizzly (who can, for short periods, run forty miles an hour) and more ferocious than a cave lion. For the first humans who invaded North America, *Arctodus* would have been a horrifying predator. “No kill by hunters would have been defensible against this beast, no hut would have been safe at night; no human would have been able to outrun this bear; and few trees would have been present or tall enough to climb for safety in the open country where it roamed,” the wildlife biologist Valerius Geist wrote of the creature. In fact, the Canadian scientist suggests that it was this bear that slowed the immigration of humans from Asia to the New World. So agile and predatory a beast, he writes, would have “made human life in North

America impossible. Only when this fauna collapsed did humans make inroads.”

Arctodus was believed extinct by the late Pleistocene, twelve thousand years ago. Might it still survive? “Occasionally a hunter shows a TV crew what he claims is a skin of one,” Gary said. He doubted it; but we both savored the thought. We wanted more bears.

Bears were special animals to both of us, for a variety of reasons. Gary had always been impressed by their size and ferocity. “They’re big, and even as a youngster I liked that about them,” he said, his green eyes glowing with childhood daydreams. “You think of them as being, in the temperate zone, at the top of the heap, like the lion in Africa or the tiger in Asia.”

Besides, for Gary—whose passion for mysteries extended to devouring whodunits and even to loving algebra (since it required solving for the unknown)—the bear clan offered a fascinating taxonomic puzzle. “Nearly everywhere there have been bears, there have been arguments about how many different types there are,” he said.

The varied appearance of grizzlies shows the common name for the species, brown bear, is a misnomer. He prefers to call them all grizzlies. For instance, the so-called red bear or Himalayan grizzly, also known as the Isabelline bear, *Ursus arctos isabellinus*, can be reddish, brown, yellow, or even white. There’s a blue bear, also considered a grizzly, *Ursus arctos pruinosus*, who lives on the Tibetan plateau, whose coat is grayish-black with a blond face. In Turkey, Iran and Iraq survive the last of a lighter-coated grizzly, *Ursus arctos syriacus*. And there are grizzlies of all different shapes, sizes and habits in between. A dwarf grizzly survives in the Gobi Desert of Mongolia; ten-foot-long grizzlies patrol the taiga of Russia’s Vladivostok area. On Admiralty Island live huge, coal-black grizzlies. They, DNA studies now show, are the closest relatives of the polar bears—who are among nature’s more recent inventions. The polar bear is a species less than half a million years old.



“And what about moon bears?” I asked. “Where do they fit in?”

“Ah!” said Gary. This was his favorite sort of question, for it required him to travel back in time. “Moon bears are the least changed of all the Old World bears,” he said. “You could even argue they are the lineage from which most other Old World bears evolved.” Four million years ago, a small bear now known as *Ursus minimus* (“small bear”) appeared in Eurasia—an animal about the size of a modern sun bear, perhaps a hundred pounds. But other than its size, “*Ursus minimus* probably looked much like a moon bear,” Gary said. “So much so, in fact, that except for the age of the bones, it would be extremely difficult to distinguish fossils of *Ursus minimus* from the skeleton of a living moon bear.”

In the temperate and subtropical forests of Eurasia, this early bear was a generalist, able to thrive in a variety of habitats, Gary explained. It could climb trees but was not restricted to thick forest. It could eat meat, but could survive on plants, too. As the climate continued to cool and the world became seasonal, the descendants of *Ursus minimus* were able to outlast the Eurasian lions and hippos who had been its cohorts in the Pliocene and Pleistocene. It was this moon bearlike creature—not the ferocious, short-faced *Arctodus*—that gave rise, in the turbulent ice ages of the Pleistocene, to all the modern bears except the South American spectacled bear and the enigmatic panda.

Gary took his greatest delight in exploring the origin of things. By the time he was in second grade, he had already memorized the geologic time scale, as well as the scientific names for most of the major animals in each. He kept an extensive collection of plastic dinosaurs, as well as a scrapbook for clippings about rare and vanishing animals: rhinos and elephants, a living legacy of the Pleistocene—like bears are.

As a child, Gary’s deepest wish had been for a time machine. But as a grown-up scientist, his greatest dream was to discover and to name a new species in our own time. The golden bear offered him a shot at every biologist’s Holy Grail.

For me, bears held a different fascination. I knew several personally. In New Hampshire, a friend of mine, wildlife rehabilitator Ben Kilham, had rescued several litters of orphaned American black bears when they were so young that their noses were still pink and their eyes still blue. I had held some of these babies in my arms. When they were youngsters, I had watched them gambol in the northern woods, smelling and licking their way through a realm no human can experience. Their world is a symphony of scent, so rich in information, Ben came to understand, that bears may even be able to assess the nutritional and perhaps medicinal properties of plants with nose and tongue. I would return home feeling blessed by another world, redolent with the heady, musky, rich-earth smell of their fur, the caress of their wet, ribbonlike tongues still tingling my skin.

With Ben and with other wildlife biologists, I had also tracked wild, radio-collared black bears through the woods of Massachusetts and Vermont. One of the bears I followed was a ten-year-old female known as Number 125. Bear biologist John McDonald and his colleagues had studied her for eight years, tracking her each winter to her den to tranquilize, weigh, and examine her and her generations of cubs.

One February, we had followed the beep of the telemetry receiver to Number 125's shallow den beneath a slab of granite. Before John had a chance to warn me, and before the veterinarian had tranquilized her, I wedged my face into its opening. I looked directly into the mahogany eyes and tan muzzle of a fully alert mother bear and her two cubs.

My face was inches from her jaws. But I was never for a moment afraid. I knew that American black bears, unlike grizzly bears, almost never attack people. They do not consider us prey and are far more likely to flee than to strike out, even in defense of cubs. I knew that this female was probably more mortified than angry to see me, a hideous human, invading the sanctity of her nursery. But I knew something else as well.



Meeting her eyes, I recognized in her brown gaze an ancient knowing, a cognizance remarkably humanlike, and yet more-than-human.

Humans have known this about bears since the dawn of our kind. For possibly as long as fifty thousand years, festivals of the bear ceremonies have celebrated the bear as a sacred messenger and mediator, a teacher, a traveler between worlds. Throughout human history, people have claimed kinship with them. Bears are strikingly humanlike: when they stand on their hind legs, when they sit, back against a tree, their postures look like ours, their front legs hanging down like arms. Their hands are dexterous enough to peel a peach. (The Blackfoot Indian word for the human hand is the same as the word for bear paw.) They are so intelligent that skilled trackers like Pennsylvania-based bear biologist Gary Alt has documented them outwitting people by causing their own tracks to vanish—by carefully backtracking. Ben Kilham considers bears at least as smart as chimps, though the animals are very different. In so many ways, bears mirror, then exceed us: in strength, in size, in sensory acuity. So we have made them our teachers, our mentors, our inspiration. The Khanty and Mansi people of Siberia say they received fire and weapons from the world's first bear. Many Native American tribes say the bear taught them the use of medicinal herbs. (And bears may in fact number among the animals documented to use plants as medicine. Just one example: an Alaskan hunting guide watched, puzzled, as a grizzly methodically stripped the bark from a willow shrub, which bears don't normally eat. He shot the bear and noticed the bear had an abscessed tooth—around which was packed willow bark, the source of salicylic acid, the active ingredient in aspirin.) The fierce Germanic warriors, the Berserks, took their name from the beast, and wore its skin in an effort to take on bear magic.

These northern peoples saw bears perform the impossible each spring. Emerging from the deathly still of hibernation out of gravelike dens, bears rise, Christlike, from the dead. The wise female bear, like the grandmother I had met in her den, brings forth her young from the earth

itself, a netherworld Genetrix. Perhaps it was the bear who taught us to expect miracles. Some researchers suggest this is why humans bury their dead, trusting the bear's promise of transformation.

The Ostyaks, of western Siberia, say the bear began as a heavenly force, born of a union between the sun and moon. The bear still dwells in the sky. Ursa Major dominates the northern night, making its passage around the Pole Star in Ursa Minor, the star that has guided our kind for millennia, and given us our aptly named "bearings." At both ends of the universe, from the underworld den to the sky, the bear helps us find our place in the renewing cycle of the cosmos.

So, for our different reasons, Gary and I both saw, in this bear, opportunities as golden as its mysterious and intriguing coat. Whether we would describe a new species or an unknown color phase; whether we would witness miracles or achieve transformation; whether our story would lead to renewal or frustration—of course we could not know. But we were willing to follow a bear into a mine field to find out.

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If he had anything like a totem animal, Gary mused on the plane, it would be the bear. The sole emblem on the Galbreath family crest, he said, is the head of a bear in a muzzle.

The symbol suggests controlled power. The Montgomery family crest, on the other hand, suggests unbridled rage: it shows a woman holding up the severed head of her enemy. This might have alarmed another traveler about to spend six weeks with a member of such a clan. But Gary, ever generous and optimistic, took this as a good sign. He noted that Galbreath means "foreign mercenary" and Gary means "spear-carrier." On paper, at least, we made a ferocious combination. "Considering where we're going," Gary had told me, "we should make an exceptionally successful team."

But in the fever-dream jumble of the market at Kampong Son, I have my doubts.



In the migrainous heat, an old woman spits blood on the dirt. No; she is chewing betel, the nutmeg-sized fruit of the graceful *Areca* palm. It produces a mild narcotic that reddens the saliva and stains the teeth black. The woman looks up at me and, parting bloodied lips, offers me a shocking, generous, grandmotherly smile—and then returns to tending a brace of skewered songbirds on the grill. Their eyes have melted, their beaks burned black.

We drive on to seek another bear.

More about Asiatic Black Bears from Bear Trust International

*Bear Trust is solely responsible for the information in this section.
Opinions about this information may vary.*

Asiatic Black Bear - *Ursus Thibetanus*

Other Names: Himalayan Black Bear, Tibetan Black Bear, Moon Bear

Appearance:

The Asiatic black bear is medium-sized, with a black coat and a lightish muzzle, with white on the chin. There is a distinct white patch on the chest which is sometimes in the shape of a "V." The "golden moon bear" represents a color phase.

Size:

Adult males range from 220 to 440 pounds (100 to 200 kg), while adult females weight from 110 to 275 pounds (50 to 125 kg). Birth weight is 10.5 ounces (298 grams).

Reproduction:

Female Asiatic black bears mature at three to four years of age. Mating practices and birthing seasons are different between populations. Cubs are weaned at less than six months, but may stay with their mothers for two to three years.

Social Life:

Little is known of the social organization in the wild.

Food:

Asiatic black bears eat fruits, nests of bees, insects, invertebrates, small vertebrates, and carrion.

Habitat:

Asiatic black bears inhabit forested areas, especially hills and mountainous areas. They are distributed through Southern Asia, Northeast China, Japan and Far Eastern Russia. Their habitat varies by seasons; they spend their summer at higher elevations and descend to lower elevations during the winter.

Wild Population:

The population of Asiatic black bears is unknown. They are threatened by habitat destruction and the harvesting of forests.

FYI:

Asiatic black bears and American black bears are sister taxa; they are more closely related to each other than to the six other living bear species.

In northern parts of their range, Asiatic black bears den to hibernate, but in the in the southern limits of their range they probably do not.