

White panda is spotted in China for the first time

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The white panda's appearance is caused by albinism, a rare genetically inherited condition that prevents the normal synthesis of melanin, resulting in white hair or pale skin, as well as reddish eyes.

A handout image provided by the Wolong National Nature Reserve shows a rare all-white giant panda in the Wolong National Nature Reserve in Wenchuan County, China (Wolong National Nature Reserve via The New York Times)

Written by Tiffany May

An all-white, albino panda has appeared in a natural reserve in China, the first of its kind to be documented, an expert said this week.

The panda was photographed in April with an infrared camera at the Wolong National Nature Reserve in the southwestern province of Sichuan, local authorities said in a statement.

Li Sheng, who belongs to the Species Survival Commission of the International Union for Conservation of Nature, said it was the first recorded image of a wild giant panda that is fully white. (There have been sightings of brown-and-white pandas in Qinling, a mountainous region in the northwestern Chinese province of Shaanxi.)

The white panda's appearance is caused by albinism, a rare genetically inherited condition that prevents the normal synthesis of melanin, resulting in white hair or pale skin, as well as reddish eyes. Giant pandas are one of eight bear species, and albinism has been recorded in many other species of bears, though rarely.

“I personally think it's quite random for it to be discovered, since albinism manifests itself so infrequently,” Li said in a telephone interview. “This was recorded just in time.”

Aside from sensitivity to sunlight, albinism does not usually have a negative effect on the animals, but their unusual appearance can make them easier to detect in the wild.

“Based on the photo, albinism has not affected the life of the white panda much,” said Li, who is also a researcher at Peking University. “It looks quite well, quite strong.”

Duan Zhaogang, the Communist Party secretary of the Wolong district, said in the statement the reserve would increase its use of infrared cameras to track the growth and movements of the panda.

Wild pandas can be difficult to study because they mostly live alone, often in remote areas. To facilitate research, a Chinese conservation center has developed a facial recognition app that can distinguish one panda from another, the state news media said this month.

There are about 1,900 giant pandas living in the wild, according to a 2016 report by the International Union for Conservation of Nature.

- NYT