

# Bear Specialist Group

## On the Trail of Brown Bears in Tajikistan

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In September 2011, the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) visited Tajikistan (central Asia) as part of an effort to explore conservation needs in the Pamir Mountains; another goal was to investigate options for developing transboundary cooperation and collaboration between Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China to help facilitate management of the region's unique biodiversity, encourage regional economic development and tourism, and promote diplomacy and cooperation among the countries. Throughout implementation of the Tajik Pamirs project, WCS partnered with the United States Government's Forest Service International Programs office (USFS-IP).

As a first step, WCS and USFS-IP carried out a series of consultative meetings during an 8-day period. The team traveled with members of the local NGO Nature Protection Team to Gorno-Badakhshan, including Khorog, Murghab, Zorkul Strictly Protected Area, and communities along the upper Panj River between Kulyab and Lake Zorkul. Zigzagging across the Pamir Plateau and skirting along the Afghan border, the team talked to a wide range of stakeholders and had first hand opportunities to see some of its unique biodiversity, including evidence of brown bears.



Part of the Team: from left to right, Shodigul Mamadyorbekova, Tanya Rosen, Randy Welsh, Stefan Michel and Peter Zahler.

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# Bear Specialist Group

Very little information exists on the status of brown bears in Tajikistan. The brown bear is included in the Red List of Tajikistan as *Ursus arctos isabellinus* (Abdusalyamov 1988). Across the border in Afghanistan, brown bears are considered a priority for survey work, given little current data and information available on its status in the region. Brown bears have also been placed on Afghanistan's Protected Species List, prohibiting all hunting and trade of this species within the country. In Tajikistan, taking brown bears is strictly regulated, although illegal hunting, especially for medicinal purposes (bear parts) is known to occur, and a number of bear cubs have been brought to Dushanbe Zoo during the last few years.



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The habitat in the Darvaz range, where the team spotted a bear.

During the first part of the mission, while traveling across the Eastern Pamirs between Murghab and Zorkul Strictly Protected Area, the team sighted ~1000 Marco Polo sheep (*Ovis ammon polii*) and 76 ibex (*Capra sibirica*), as well as diggings in the ground where a bear seemed to be hunting red marmots (*Marmota caudata*). This area was a hunting concession where brown bears were frequently sighted moving across the border into Afghanistan. There is no indication of serious human-bear conflicts in the area, despite the large number of livestock (yaks, goats and sheep). However there was one report of a bear briefly harassing a household. The bear was eventually chased away by the local people with rocks. According to local anecdotal knowledge, brown bears sighted on the Tajik side of the Pamirs are subject to poaching pressure in Afghanistan.

The second part of the mission took the team to Zihgar village in the Darvaz range. A conservancy called "M-Sayod" has been active in the protection of Tajik markhor (*Capra falconeri heptneri*), which historically have been heavily poached. The team learned of recent sightings of 8 individual bears in one place in the conservancy, with 3 different pelage colorations: light brown, brown with a white collar around the neck and brown-greyish.

The team hiked through Obgard gorge in the Darvaz range to look for bears, and eventually sighted one hidden in a juniper bush feeding under a fruit tree (*Cotoneaster* or *Celtis*). It was at 2200 meters of altitude, in a mixed habitat dominated by walnut, almond, maple, cotoneaster and juniper amid rocky slopes and steep meadows where markhor and ibex were peacefully feeding. The team observed the bear for more than 1 hour. In conversations with two



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Brown bear sighted in the Darvaz range of Tajikistan, 2200 m elevation.

# Bear Specialist Group



Hole dug by a bear excavating a marmot in Jarty Gumbez..

local herders, we learned that the bears are occasionally seen feeding on dead livestock but are not thought to be killing livestock. We found a scat containing traces of fruit and walnuts.

A subsequent conversation with the leader of “Muhofiz” Conservancy, which borders the Dashtijum protected area, revealed that conflicts between bears and livestock as well as farming are more significant, and some farmers might be using poison to eliminate predators.

Consultative meetings occurred in Dushanbe on September 27–28 to address stakeholder concerns and present the opportunities related to both a transboundary Pamirs initiative and improved national efforts at conservation and management of this region. Approximately

50 people attended this meeting from a variety of stakeholder groups. During discussions about the Wakhan and Upper Panj river valleys, brown bear conservation was identified as one of the priorities. Identified threats included conflict with livestock and beehives leading to retribitional killing, as well as poaching for medicinal purposes and parts. Some of the stakeholders proposed finding better measures to protect bears and better tools to reduce conflicts.

Finally, in a separate meeting at the State Agency of Forestry and Hunting, the Deputy head of this agency mentioned that 10 permits for bear hunts have been confirmed by the Commission in charge of quota setting. The so-called Tien Shan (or Isabelline) subspecies of brown bear of Central Asia is on Appendix I of CITES, so hunters from the U.S. or European Union would not be allowed to import trophies; however, Tajikistan is not yet a member of CITES so could conceivably sell a hunt to a person from another non-member country.

Given the local interest in brown bear conservation and the threats that some of the populations might be facing, the team hopes that in the near future there will be opportunities to conduct research on the status of bears in this region (in conjunction with efforts across the border in Afghanistan and Pakistan), and engage in dialogues with local farmers to find ways to mitigate existing conflicts.

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Eastern Pamir Plateau, where Tajikistan meets Afghanistan.

## Literature Cited

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