

Giant panda's 'cousin' lived in Spain

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Illustration of Agriarctos beatrix. Image: SINC

A team of Spanish scientists have found a new ursid fossil species in the area of Nombrevilla in Zaragoza, Spain. Agriarctos beatrix was a small plantigrade omnivore and was genetically related to giant pandas, according to the authors of the study.

The fossil remains of a new ursid <u>species</u>, Agriarctos beatrix, have been discovered in the Nombrevilla 2 site in the province of Zaragoza, Spain. Researchers from Spain's National Museum of Natural Sciences (MNCN-CSIC) and the University of Valencia suggested that this plantigrade lived during the Myocene period some 11 million years ago.

"This bear species was small, even smaller than the Sun bear – currently the smallest bear species. It would not have weighed more than 60 kilos,"



as explained to SINC by Juan Abella, researcher at the Department of Paleobiology of the MNCN-CSIC and lead author of the study, published in the *Estudios Geológicos* journal.

Although it is difficult to determine its physical appearance given that only pieces of dental fossils have been found, scientists believe that it would have had dark fur with white spots mainly on the chest, around the eyes and possibly close to the tail.

"This fur pattern is considered primitive for bears, such as that of the giant panda whose white spots are so big that it actually seems to be white with black spots," states Abella.

Agriarctos beatrix, from the Ursidae family and related to giant <u>pandas</u>, would have lived in the forest and could have been more sessile that those bears that tend to hunt more, such as the brown or polar bears. According to researchers, the extinct bear would have escaped from other larger carnivores by climbing up trees.

The expert highlights that "its diet would have been similar to that of the sun bear or the spectacled bear that only eat vegetables and fruit and sometimes vertebrates, insects, honey and dead animals."

"We know that it was a different species to those documented up until now because of its morphological differences and the size of its teeth," confirms the scientist. "We have compared it with species of the same kind (Agriarctos) and similar kinds from the same period (Ursavus and Indarctos)".

The reasons for its extinction have yet to be determined but "the most probable cause is likely to be the opening up of the forests giving way to more open, drier spaces and the appearance of similar yet larger and more competitive species," says Abella.



The findings now date the appearance of this group related to giant pandas some two millions years later, from 9 million years ago to 11 million years ago. They could have originated in the north-east basins of the Iberian Peninsula.

More information: Abella J.; Montoya P.; Morales J. "A New species of Agriarctos (Ailuropodinae, Ursidae, Carnivora) in the locality of Nombrevilla 2 (Zaragoza, Spain)". *Estudios Geológicos*, 67[2]: 187-191. Julio-diciembre 2011. DOI:10.3989/egeol.40714.182

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