

# Seeing double

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Tree-dwellers... Peru's spectacled bears eat berries and figs, but not marmalade. *Photo: Reuters*

## Christopher Heaney tracks a British bear's Peruvian roots.

For many children, the name Paddington Bear conjures a happy mental picture of wellington boots and cocoa. But as readers of Michael Bond's latest Paddington adventure, *Paddington Races Ahead*, should remember, the bear may have been found at a London railway station, but he is, of course, from "deepest, darkest Peru".

In Bond's new book, *Paddington* shows more South American pride than ever. He tries to pay his bus fare with a Peruvian centavo and gets into the Olympic spirit by running (under) hurdles for a "Hometown bear makes good!" documentary for his family and friends in Lima.



So charming is Bond's take on Paddington's background that on finishing the book, families might be hungry for more than a marmalade sandwich. To wit: did Paddington really eat llama pate when he lived in Peru? Just how good can the alfajor biscuits that he remembers be? And, most pressing of all, do bears come from Peru?



Yes, there is a Peruvian bear. In Spanish, its name is the oso andino, or Andean bear, but in English, the light markings that distinguish its face from the rest of its black fur have earned it the name spectacled bear. Spectacled bears inhabit South America from Venezuela to the north of Chile, mostly on the humid eastern slopes of the Andes. One of the world's oldest bears, they're on the smaller side, weighing only 200 kilograms or less. They spend a good part of their lives at a 45-degree angle, eating insects, rodents, deer, berries, birds, bamboo hearts, palm-frond petioles, bromeliads, cactus and figs. They also occasionally eat cattle and corn, which doesn't endear them to farmers.

The spectacled bear is not endangered but it is threatened by the expansion of agriculture, drug production and poaching. Fortunately, Paddington's relatives are shy creatures, hiding from humans in nests they build in high trees.

A family that wants to see spectacled bears in their home country can do so in Lima, Peru's capital, at the Parque de las Leyendas. The spectacled bear is a highlight of the zoo, but the park's more ancient offerings also make it worth a visit: the Maranga Archaeological Zone has crumbling temples, burial grounds and a museum filled with mummies.

Lima's other zoo, the Parque Zoologico Huachipa, is home to spectacled bears and other animals. And the alfajor biscuits served in cafes in Lima's Miraflores district are as good as Paddington remembers.

In Cuzco, the gateway to the empire of the Incas, there are no bears within the city limits, but llamas patrol its pre-Columbian and colonial streets, which some say the Incas laid out in the shape of a puma. No bear-seeking tour of Peru is complete without a visit to the Inca site of Machu Picchu, for its crumbling temples, baths and palaces. A few visitors have seen wild spectacled bears about the site's south-western slopes. The rest of us, however, can guarantee a face-to-face encounter by visiting the Inkaterra Machu Picchu Spectacled Bear Project at the luxurious Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel in the riverside town below.

The project aims to rehabilitate spectacled bears rescued from captivity and reintroduce them to the wild, as does the Chaparri Reserve and Bear Rescue Centre. Accessible from the coastal city of Chiclayo, the Chaparri Reserve is able to take a more holistic approach to increasing the bears' numbers in the surrounding dry forests and protective enclosures.

Of course, the spectacled bear is no cuddly Paddington and should be given the respectful distance it deserves as a wild bear. And what the bears lack in duffle-coat appeal, they make up for with their affectionate, if rude, habit of occasionally sticking a tongue out in your direction.

***Paddington Races Ahead* by Michael Bond (HarperCollins, RRP \$19.99) will be available in bookshops next month.**

- Telegraph, London

Read more: <http://www.theage.com.au/travel/seeing-double-20120621-20q6i.html#ixzz1zgYAlExl>