

Andean Bears Jump from Treetops

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Very few people have had the opportunity to see an Andean Bear climb to the top of a tree. Our project had the luck to see this rare event on two occasions in the cloud forest of the Alto Choco Reserve, Intag region, northern Ecuador. The first occasion was in July 2000 and the second in February 2006. We saw four bears in total, three of which demonstrated this fascinating escape behavior; the remaining bear was hidden in the surrounding vegetation. All the encounters were unexpected and the bears instinctively climbed the nearest tree and headed for the treetops. While climbing they groaned and panted heavily, simultaneously urinating and defecating, perhaps because of the intense fright that we gave them. Trying to evade us, they looked for a way to reach nearby trees by jumping from one branch to another over a space of about 1.5 meters. As time passed by, the bears gradually realized that they couldn't escape us, and as a result they began to bend and break branches, quickly accumulating vegetation to build platforms high in the tree. The platforms were apparently made in an attempt to hide from the sight of the humans below.

Perhaps intending to scare us, the bears broke and noisily threw down moderately big branches from the treetop. When they could not elude us, each bear (individually) went to the extreme end of a branch and bit it to break it. They then swung on and balanced on the branch so that their weight helped the branch break and fell one by one to the ground. In the first encounter one bear fell approximately 7 meters into a large quantity of suro, a bamboo-like plant. The suro appeared to act as a cushion and break the bears' fall. On the second occasion two bears fell directly to the ground, with one bear falling from about 8 meters and the other from 10 meters. In each case, once on the ground, each bear rapidly ran off without showing any of lesions or fractures.

Anecdotal evidence from farmers and hunters indicates that bears larger than those we observed have jumped from trees 15 to 20 meters above ground, although these bears did not prepare for the jump in the manner described above.

Local farmers and hunters have reported that comparatively larger and heavier bears than the ones we saw, when threatened whilst in a tree, also fall from great heights to escape dangers. However, in these cases of more imminent danger involving gunshots,

the bears prepare their dismount in a different way to the one I have described above. In these cases, it is reported that the bears simply jumped from heights between 15 and 20 meters, without showing the branch-breaking behavior that we have witnessed. I am not sure whether other bear species display the same type of escape behavior as the one displayed by the Andean bear. However, it appears to me that no animal of such weight should be able to jump from such heights without injury. It would be very interesting to know why the Andean bear apparently doesn't injure itself when jumping from such heights.