

Twin panda births surprise National Zoo, though one cub later dies

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Giant panda Mei Xiang, sleeping in the indoor habitat at the National Zoo in Washington, D.C., recently, gave birth to twin cubs Aug. 23. The zookeepers were not expecting a multiple birth. One of the cubs later died. Photo: AP/Jacquelyn Martin

Laurie Thompson was sitting at her desk in the National Zoo's giant panda house Saturday night, when she heard a noise from a video screen. It showed Mei Xiang, who had delivered a cub about four hours earlier.

Thompson, a biologist, looked at the screen, and there, wiggling and squawking on the floor, was a second cub.

Thompson jumped out of her seat, ran into a co-worker at the door and yelled, "We have two!"

On Sunday, the zoo was trying to care for the two cubs the size of large mice, and their mother.

Twin Bundles Of Giant Panda Joy

It was only the third time that giant panda twins have been born in the United States. In one of the other cases, the twins did not survive.

The news flashed around the world.

The first cub was born at 5:35 p.m., while the second cub arrived at 10:07 p.m.

The second cub was placed in an incubator to keep it warm, then examined, fed and returned to its mother. Then the older cub was taken out.

Both cubs squealed loudly, a sign of good health. "A screaming baby panda makes us all happy," said Dr. Don Neiffer, the zoo's chief veterinarian.

One of the cubs died a few days later.

Multiple Births Can Overwhelm Mothers

Zoo officials said that pandas with twins often are unable to care for both babies, and one generally dies. Swapping the cubs, so the mother cares for one at a time, increases the chances that both will survive.

Thompson, a biologist, said that she and a few other staff members had been staying overnight in the panda house on Saturday to keep an eye on Mei and the first cub. There was no hint that a second cub was coming, she said.

"I was sitting next to the computer with the panda cam on it," she said. "I started hearing this noise," the same noise Mei was making when she had the first cub.

"As soon as I looked at the camera, out popped the cub," she said. "I knew she still had one (cub) under her arm, so I knew she had had a second one."

Second Cub's Birth Surprised Zoo Staff

Thompson ran out of the room and shouted the news. She and a zoo keeper put on protective suits, booties and gloves in case they had to go near the panda enclosure or touch the cubs.

"We watched her for a few minutes just to see how she was going to do, because if she picked up both of the cubs, we were going to just let her kind of do that for a little bit," Thompson said. "But she was never able to pick them both up. She was trying, but she just couldn't figure out how to do it."

The keeper, Marty Dearie, reached into the den and retrieved one of the cubs, which was lying on the floor.

They wrapped the cub in a towel and carried it to the incubator in the keeper's office, away from Mei's den. "We don't want Mei Xiang to hear the cub," Thompson said. "We don't want to stress her."

The cub was squealing. "They squeal until you get them nice and comfortable," she said. They placed it in the warm incubator, covered it with towels, and Thompson placed her hand on it.

"They like to be snug, just like newborn babies," she said.

And The Calls Started Around The World

Dr. Copper Aitken-Palmer is the chief veterinarian at the Smithsonian's Conservation Biology Institute. When she arrived, she began calling people at a panda breeding center in China.

The Chinese have many more pandas in zoos and much more experience with cubs. Also, Aitken-Palmer wanted to share the good news.

Pandas often have twins and sometimes triplets. One set of twins was born at the National Zoo to Ling-Ling decades ago, but both cubs died.

Boys Or Girls Or One Of Each?

Mei's second cub was the stronger one, weighing about 138 grams, zoo director Dennis Kelly said. The first cub weighed about 86 grams, he said. Veterinarians were unable to determine the sex of the cubs during their exams.

The cubs' eyes are not open and their ears are small "nubs," Thompson said. They have fine white fur and distinct claws.

Mei has delivered two surviving cubs since 2005, and a second two, which did not live. Tai Shan, a male, was born on July 9, 2005, and Bao Bao, a female, celebrated her second birthday at the zoo on Sunday.

Tai Shan lives in China, which owns all giant pandas in American zoos.