

National Zoo Panda Gives Birth

Mei Xiang, a 22-year-old giant panda at the Smithsonian zoo in Washington, D.C., is the oldest panda to give birth in the United States, officials said.




By Aimee Ortiz and Marie Fazio

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After days of speculation and anticipation, a giant panda at the Smithsonian National Zoo in Washington gave birth to a cub on Friday evening, the zoo announced.

Mother and cub were doing well.

The panda, Mei Xiang, gave birth around 6:35 p.m. and was “nursing her cub and cuddling it close,” the zoo said in a tweet.

 A precious giant panda cub has arrived! We're overjoyed to share that Mei Xiang gave birth at 6:35 p.m. and is caring for her newborn attentively. Positive mothering behaviors include nursing her cub and cuddling it close.   TUNE IN: <https://t.co/99IBTV2w92>. #PandaStory pic.twitter.com/x02fEYfAmx
— National Zoo (@NationalZoo) August 21, 2020

After more than three hours of labor, Mei Xiang, who was lying on her side, honked a few times as she gave birth, rose and picked up her cub, said Brandie Smith, deputy director of the zoo. Soon after, the cub began squeaking.

The cub was a “tiny little pink bald thing,” she said, adding that a panda cub’s size is often compared to a stick of butter.

For the first week of the cub's life, Mei Xiang will stay in her den without eating or drinking while she cares for her newborn, Ms. Smith said. When the zookeepers see her leave her den for the first time, they will enter to do a quick exam on the cub.

“We know from her history that she's a good mom, and she's going to take care of that cub,” she added.

Zookeepers will monitor the pandas over video. About half of all giant panda births are twins, so staff members are on “twin watch.” If another cub is born, it would happen within 24 hours of the first birth.

This is Mei Xiang's fourth cub, said Pamela Baker-Masson, the zoo's associate director of communications and exhibits. Her three others live in China.

The latest arrival, which some deemed a miracle because of Mei Xiang's age, was viewed as a cause for celebration by many as the nation struggles amid the coronavirus pandemic at a time of political divisiveness. At 22 years old, Mei Xiang had a 1 percent chance of a successful birth. She is the oldest panda in the U.S. to give birth.

In a statement on Instagram, the zoo said the birth was “joyous news” and that zookeepers were listening for loud squeals from the cub, a sign that it is healthy.

The zookeepers are “genuinely thrilled” about the birth, Ms. Baker-Masson said.

“The cub has made some strong vocalizations,” she added. “They watched Mei Xiang pick up the cub immediately and do all the right things.”

Earlier on Friday, the zoo announced on Twitter that Mei Xiang had “become increasingly restless and began body licking — both signs that labor has probably started!”

Beginning around 3 p.m., she could be seen huffing around her enclosure on a live video stream of the pandas' habitat. The news of the birth drew so many people to the zoo's website to view the livestream that the site crashed.

Pandas are notoriously bad breeders. The animals have a mating "season" of just a few days per year, and whether in captivity or in the wild, giant pandas rarely show the desire or skill to mate, imperiling their survival. In 2014, the World Wide Fund for Nature estimated that there were only 1,864 giant pandas remaining in the wild. So whenever they do get it on, like the couple that got frisky in April in a Hong Kong zoo, it's a big deal.

Last week, when the zoo announced that the 22-year-old giant panda had "tissue consistent with fetal development," it cautioned in its statement that there was "a substantial possibility that Mei Xiang could resorb or miscarry a fetus." The zoo said that scientists do not fully understand why some mammals resorb fetuses.

Mei Xiang was artificially inseminated with frozen semen collected from Tian Tian (pronounced tee-YEN tee-YEN), her National Zoo mate, on March 22, according to the zoo.

"In late July, Mei Xiang exhibited behaviors consistent with pregnancy or pseudopregnancy," the zoo said. "Now, she is sleeping more, eating less, nest-building and has been observed body licking."