

Clouded leopard cubs born at National Zoo

March 25 2009

An endangered clouded leopard at the Smithsonian's National Zoo's Conservation & Research Center (CRC) in Front Royal, Va., gave birth to a genetically valuable litter of two cubs on Tuesday, March 24. The clouded leopard, two-and-a-half year-old "Jao Chu," has been on a pregnancy watch for five days, and started giving birth to the litter early Tuesday morning.

This is Jao Chu's first litter of cubs. Jao Chu and the cubs' father, two-and-a-half year-old "Hannibal," were born in Thailand in a collaborative research program with the Zoological Park Organization of Thailand. The cubs' sex will not be known until the first veterinary exam.

Due to deforestation and hunting, clouded leopards are vulnerable to extinction. [National Zoo](#) scientist Dr. JoGayle Howard and her team are aggressively working toward saving this species from decline. The Zoo has been working with clouded leopards at the Conservation & Research Center since 1978, with the ultimate goal of breeding these cats to create a genetically diverse population. In the past 30 years, more than 70 clouded leopards have been born at the zoo's research facility in Virginia, with the last set of cubs born in 1993.

Breeding clouded leopards in captivity has been a challenge, primarily due to male aggression, decreased breeding activity between paired animals, and high [cub](#) mortality. In 2002, the National Zoo in collaboration with the Nashville Zoo and the [Clouded Leopard](#) Species Survival Plan (SSP) created the Thailand Clouded Leopard Consortium — the largest population of confiscated clouded leopards in Southeast

Asia. The Clouded Leopard SSP oversees clouded leopard populations in zoos worldwide, and makes recommendations for potential pairs based on the genetics and pedigree of each cat. Since Thailand's cubs are only one or two generations removed from the wild, their genes are especially valuable.

To date, the Thailand Clouded Leopard Consortium has produced 32 surviving cubs. The National Zoo's program at the Front Royal facility is the only one of its kind combining breeding with scientific research. For example, scientists still do not know why male clouded leopards attack their possible mates, but several graduate students at the National Zoo are studying the males' behavior in hopes of identifying clues. One of the students plans to test anti-anxiety drugs used in humans and domestic cats in an attempt to suppress male aggression.

Howard and her team have learned how to reduce the risk of fatal attacks by hand-rearing cubs for socialization and also introducing males to their mates when they are six months old, allowing the pair to grow up together. Hannibal and Jao Chu, the only compatible pair of clouded leopards at CRC, are proof that these techniques work. The new cubs also will be handreared by experienced CRC staff.

Following mating, the gestation period for clouded leopards is about 86 to 93 days. The average litter size for clouded leopards is two to five cubs. Clouded leopard cubs weigh about a half a pound when born.

Clouded leopards are little known, very beautiful cats native to Southeast Asia and parts of China in a habitat that ranges from dense tropical evergreen forests to drier forests if there is suitable prey.

They are the smallest of the big cats, weighing just 30 to 50 pounds and measuring about five feet long. Their short legs, oversized paws, and long tail (accounts for half their length) help them balance on small

branches, and their flexible ankles allow them to run down trees headfirst.

The newborn cubs will not be on public exhibit at CRC. However, visitors may get an up-close treetop view of two clouded leopards—a male named Tai and a female named Mook—at Asia Trail at the National Zoo's Rock Creek campus in Washington DC.

Source: Smithsonian ([news](#) : [web](#))

Citation: Clouded leopard cubs born at National Zoo (2009, March 25) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-03-clouded-leopard-cubs-born-national.html>

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