

Washington zoo ready for baby panda Bei Bei's public debut

December 16 2015



Bei Bei, the newest addition to the giant panda family at Washington, DC's National Zoo, greets an indulgent press corps on December 16, 2015, as the zoo's panda house prepares to reopen to the public on January 16

The National Zoo in Washington is bracing for a flood of visitors in the New Year to greet its latest star, Bei Bei, the rare giant panda born in August.

Named by US First Lady Michelle Obama and her Chinese counterpart Peng Liyuan during a state visit in September, Bei Bei now weighs 17.5 pounds (eight kilograms).

"We're ready. We know that thousands of people will want to come and see Bei Bei," said Brandie Smith, an animal-care specialist at the [zoo](#).

On January 16, the zoo will reopen its giant panda enclosure, which has been closed to the public since Bei Bei's [birth](#) on August 22.

However the zoo has been allowing in small groups to accustom the tiny ball of black and white fur to visitors, panda keeper Juan Rodriguez said.

Zoo employees have been able to see the infant creature, and dozens of journalists were invited Wednesday for Bei Bei's media debut.

Admission to the zoo is free, but dues-paying members will get exclusive access to Bei Bei in early January before the Panda House reopens to the general public.

Bei Bei is the son of Mei Xiang and Tian Tian, female and male giant pandas on loan to the zoo from China.

The panda's birth was the result of artificial insemination—a delicate affair because females are fertile only once a year, and for no more than two days, said Pierre Comizzoli, the veterinarian in charge.

Mei Xiang actually gave birth to twins, but one died of pneumonia after just a few days. Bei Bei is in perfect health, and should follow in the footsteps of his older sister, Bao Bao, who became the darling of the zoo after her birth in 2013, caretakers said.



Bei Bei and his mother Mei Xiang make their first joint media appearance at the National Zoo in Washington, DC on December 16, 2015; Bei Bei makes his debut to the general public on January 16

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