

Surviving baby panda in 'perfect health' says French zoo

August 5 2017

The first baby panda born in France is in good health and feeding from its mother, staff at Beauval Zoo said Saturday, as they came to terms with losing its twin.

Zookeepers were on alert to ensure that the surviving panda cub of twins born on Friday makes it through the touchy first week of its life.

"The first week is the most difficult because it is still very fragile," the zoo's chief vet Baptiste Mulot said on Saturday.

But the early signs appeared to be good.

"He is breastfeeding from his mother, we'll see if we have to supplement that with milk brought by the two Chinese carers..." he added.

The Chinese team, from the centre for breeding pandas in Chengdu southwest China, had already given the panda three bottle feeds, giving it somewhere between 1-1.3 millilitres of milk.

Huan Huan "is a very protective mother, which is very good, but that complicates the work of the Chinese carers a bit when it comes to taking the cub away every two hours," said Mulot.

There was joy and pain Friday as the zoo's only female panda gave birth to twins, but one died soon afterwards.

Huan Huan, on loan to Beauval zoo in central France from China, delivered the first cub at 10:18 pm (2018 GMT) and the second at 10:32.

But soon after birth, the first, which weighed just 121 grams (4.2 ounces), began having problems breathing and died despite the best efforts of zoo staff.

'Too weak to survive'

"It was too weak to survive. The Chinese experts, who have experience of this, saw it straight away," zoo director Rodolphe Delord said.

"Our veterinary teams did everything they could to save it, but it was too small, too weak."

But he said the second twin, which weighed in at a healthier 142.4 grams, was in "perfect health".

Just as pandas do in the wild, the mother quickly focussed her interest on the second cub, as if instinctively aware that its chances of survival were best.

The cub stayed mainly with his mother, but whenever it was taken away from her it was immediately put in an incubator, said chief vet Mulot.

That allowed the Chinese carers to weigh it and wash it and supplement the mother's feeding with milk from a bottle.

Mulot welcomed the presence of the Chinese team, who had travelled over specially for the birth. Their "eye and experience are very important," he said.

For the moment, the cub is known simply as "Mini Yuan Zi", after its

father.

Visitors to the zoo were delighted at the news of the birth.

"I'm so happy that a baby panda was born here because later, I want to work here," said 13-year-old Marion, who made a special trip with her parents from the southern city of Avignon.

Visitors will have to wait three months to see the family in their enclosure, when the baby panda will have opened its eyes and be covered in hair. In the meantime, visitors can watch a film of the pandas on giant screens.

Nine-year-old Huan Huan and her male partner Yuan Zi arrived at Beauval zoo in January 2012 on a 10-year loan from China after intense negotiations between Paris and Beijing.

Breeding pandas is notoriously difficult and this is the first time a cub has been born in France.

The female panda is only in heat once a year for about 48 hours. The gestation period for pandas is a mere 50 days.

Huan Huan (meaning "happy") and Yuan Zi ("chubby") are the only giant pandas living in France.

The pair were brought together in February, in the hope they would mate, but it didn't happen. In the end, the zoo performed an artificial insemination.

If all goes well with the birth, the surviving cub will leave Beauval in the next two to three years to be returned to China.

As a measure of how important the event is, France's first lady Brigitte Macron has been named—along with her Chinese counterpart—the baby panda's godmother.

In a statement, she was "very happy" to take on the role. The zoo said she would be visiting the new arrival in the coming months.

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