

Twin panda cubs debut at Tokyo zoo, woo devoted fans

January 12 2022, by Mari Yamaguchi



In this photo provided by Tokyo Zoological Park Society, visitors use smartphones to take pictures of Japanese-born twin pandas and their mother at Ueno Zoo in Tokyo, Wednesday, Jan. 12, 2022. Twin panda cubs made their first public appearance Wednesday before their devoted fans but only briefly - just for three days for now - due to the upsurge of the highly transmissible coronavirus variant. Credit: Tokyo Zoological Park Society via AP

Twin panda cubs made their first public appearance Wednesday before devoted fans in Tokyo, but they will be on display only briefly for now—over three days—due to a spike in COVID-19 cases driven by the omicron variant.

The twins, male cub Xiao Xiao and its sister Lei Lei, which were born at Tokyo's Ueno Zoo in June, took their first steps as beaming fans held up their smartphones to film the cuddly pair as they played together.

In a video released by the zoo Wednesday, the twin cubs sit back to back on a tree playing with bamboo while visitors can be heard saying "kawaii (cute)!" in the background. Then the male cub steps on its sister to move up the tree.

"My heart thumped with excitement when I first saw them," said Kirie Tanaka, an avid panda fan who came from the western Japanese city of Osaka for the day.

During her turn, the cubs were pretending to eat bamboo and "that was just adorable," said Tanaka, whose hat and bag were decorated with panda-motif ornaments. "It's so comforting to see them."

The twins, which were palm-sized pink creatures when they were born, now weigh as much as a toddler each and have developed black-and-white fur. They enjoy climbing trees and playing together on the [wood chips](#) on the ground, according to the zoo.



In this photo provided by Tokyo Zoological Park Society, Japanese-born twin pandas Xiao Xiao, top, and Lei Lei, bottom, are seen together at Ueno Zoo in Tokyo, Wednesday, Jan. 12, 2022. Twin panda cubs made their first public appearance Wednesday before their devoted fans but only briefly - just for three days for now - due to the upsurge of the highly transmissible coronavirus variant. Credit: Tokyo Zoological Park Society via AP

In preparation for their debut, the twins and their mother were placed in a shared living quarter where they were exposed to sounds from a radio to get used to noise and voices from visitors.

The zoo has been closed since Tuesday as the highly transmissible omicron variant spreads rapidly across Japan. The zoo is open only for the twin panda exhibit until Friday, with 1,080 visitors who won slots in

a competitive lottery granted access each day.

Zoo staff Naoya Ohashi lamented the scaled-down debut and said he hopes many more people can see the panda cubs after coronavirus infections slow.

Groups of six people at a time were allowed to enter the panda quarters, where they could remain for one minute. The public viewing period is limited to two hours in the morning.

The rare animals live mainly in the bamboo-covered mountains in China's Sichuan area.



This photo provided by Tokyo Zoological Park Society, shows Japanese-born twin pandas, Lei Lei, center, Xiao Xiao, left, and their mother Shin Shin at Ueno

Zoo in Tokyo, Wednesday, Jan. 12, 2022. Twin panda cubs made their first public appearance Wednesday before their devoted fans but only briefly - just for three days for now - due to the upsurge of the highly transmissible coronavirus variant. Credit: Tokyo Zoological Park Society via AP



Visitors queue to see the twin giant pandas Xiao Xiao and Lei Lei and their mother Shin Shin Wednesday, Jan. 12, 2022, at Ueno Zoo. in Tokyo. Twin panda cubs made their long-awaited first public appearance Wednesday before their devoted fans but only limited to three days as their zoo has to close amid the upsurge of the highly transmissible coronavirus variant. Credit: AP Photo/Eugene Hoshiko



Souvenir products of the twin giant pandas Xiao Xiao and Lei Lei are sold at a shop as the panda cubs made their much-awaited first public appearance Wednesday, Jan. 12, 2022, at Ueno Zoo. in Tokyo. Credit: AP Photo/Eugene Hoshiko



Visitors with panda hats pick up a souvenir product Wednesday, Jan. 12, 2022, at Ueno Zoo. in Tokyo. Twin panda cubs made their long-awaited first public appearance Wednesday before their devoted fans but only limited to three days as their zoo has to close amid the upsurge of the highly transmissible coronavirus variant. Credit: AP Photo/Eugene Hoshiko



Empty cafeteria area with a monitor of introduction of the twin giant pandas Xiao Xiao and Lei Lei is seen Wednesday, Jan. 12, 2022, at Ueno Zoo. in Tokyo. Twin panda cubs made their long-awaited first public appearance Wednesday before their devoted fans but only limited to three days as their zoo has to close amid the upsurge of the highly transmissible coronavirus variant. Credit: AP Photo/Eugene Hoshiko



Souvenir products of the twin giant pandas Xiao Xiao and Lei Lei are sold at a shop Wednesday, Jan. 12, 2022, at Ueno Zoo. in Tokyo. Twin panda cubs made their long-awaited first public appearance Wednesday before their devoted fans but only limited to three days as their zoo has to close amid the upsurge of the highly transmissible coronavirus variant. Credit: AP Photo/Eugene Hoshiko



Souvenir products of the twin giant pandas Xiao Xiao and Lei Lei at a shop as the panda cubs made their much-awaited first public appearance Wednesday, Jan. 12, 2022, at Ueno Zoo. in Tokyo. Credit: AP Photo/Eugene Hoshiko



Souvenir shop clerks prepare to open the shop as twin panda cubs made their much-awaited first public appearance Wednesday on Wednesday, Jan. 12, 2022, at Ueno Zoo, in Tokyo. The Japanese-born twin pandas are now six months old and making a long-awaited debut to the public, but only for three days as the zoo is closing amid the omicron upsurge. AP Photo/Eugene Hoshiko)

China has for decades loaned its unofficial national mascot in what is known as "panda diplomacy." All pandas, including those born abroad, must eventually be returned to China.

The twin cubs' elder sister, Xiang Xiang, born in the Ueno Zoo in 2017, is set to be sent back to China in June.

There are about 1,800 pandas living in the wild in China and about 500

others in captivity in zoos and reserves, the majority within the country.

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