

Edinburgh Zoo



[Edinburgh Zoo](#) is owned by the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland and is situated in 82 acres of land on the side of a hill in Corstorphine. The many animals there need to be looked after all the time and the zoo is therefore open to the public 365 days a year.

The Society also own the [Highland Wildlife Park](#) at Kincraig, near Kingussie on the A9. The polar bear, Mercedes, was moved there last year from Edinburgh Zoo to a purpose-built enclosure, but the inventory of animals at the wildlife park also includes Scottish wildcats and Arctic foxes.



Highlights of a normal Zoo day include the Penguin Parade at 2.15pm and the Animal Antics show. There is also a hilltop safari when you can jump on the free safari bus and travel around the zoo. (It is a bit hilly so this can be useful for the recalcitrant toddler or less fit among you.)

This summer, Sun bears are being added to the zoo family. They come from south-east Asia and have distinctive markings on their chests. All told there are more than a thousand animals in the collection.

But what is Edinburgh zoo all about? Well, of course it is a good fun family day out – and lying within the city boundaries it is very accessible. It is the only one in Scotland now following the closure of the Glasgow zoo at Calderpark in 2003, although there are several in England including one in Blackpool where a new baby gorilla has just become the first to be born there in captivity. This is an important birth as gorillas are in danger of becoming extinct.

One object of maintaining a zoo is to study the behaviour of animals, but also to fulfil an educational purpose for children and adults alike, who might not otherwise have the opportunity to see such animals at relatively close quarters. Edinburgh Zoo's website tells us that their educational purpose is paramount among their objectives.

The Royal Zoological Society of Scotland is a charity which was founded by an Edinburgh lawyer in 1909. Its purpose is grandly stated to be:- 'To promote, facilitate and encourage the study of zoology and kindred subjects and to foster and develop amongst the people an interest in and knowledge of animal life.'

Whether or not you agree with the keeping of animals in cages, often in smaller environments than they would enjoy in the wild, there is merit in the educational aspect alone.

In earlier times zoology concentrated on the anatomy of each animal, but now one of its principal purposes is to breed animals which may be dying out in the wild. Most zoos are situated in city locations and can attract many visitors (notwithstanding that they can be rather smelly in hot weather!) The enclosures have probably become a little more like their natural habitat over recent years, although it is hard to ignore the pacing of a polar bear in an enclosure which is tiny compared to the endless ice and water where he might live in the wild. The stress which some of the animals suffer in captivity is obvious even to someone who is not an animal expert.

Zoos have their opponents. Some critics say that the conservation aspect is very small, but then without them would there be any conservation at all?

In Washington earlier this year there was considerable media frenzy when the giant panda, Tai Shan, was taken back to China (from whence he came). The panda had become a much-loved

attraction at the zoo, and real tears were shed on his departure in an air freight crate. (Panda mania had also become a multi-million dollar industry at the zoo where pandas adorned many of the items in the zoo shop). He has now gone back to China to become one of 150 pandas whose purpose is simply to breed. The Chinese are not quite so gooey-eyed about the pandas they keep in captivity, but they do understand the need to keep the species alive. There are now less than 2,000 giant pandas left in the world. In Washington Tai Shan enjoyed purpose-made birthday cakes. In China he will just be one of many kept for breeding.

The Washington Post told the story at huge length in many articles in the paper and on their website but it was encapsulated in two photographs on their front page (5 February 2010) :- One of the panda peeking out of the bars of the crate, with the quotation from Don Moore, the associate director of animal care at the National Zoo in Washington :- "I'm sad that he's leaving, but (it's) good that he's going over there to save his species." In the meantime the zookeeper in China was quoted as saying:- "Americans are too emotional about Tai Shan." According to The Post, China owns all giant pandas in US zoos, and thus all cubs born in captivity in the US must be returned to take part in the important breeding programme.



Edinburgh Zoo announced in 2008 that it had signed a letter of intent with China to try and bring giant pandas to Edinburgh, where it is hoped they might live for about 10 years and perhaps cubs would be born here. However, an earthquake in China after that announcement devastated the Sichuan Province panda reserve, and the latest word from Edinburgh Zoo is that their representatives went to China again only last month, and the discussions are ongoing. If you want to see a giant panda before then you can see Ching Ching who was a resident at London Zoo at the [National Museum Scotland](#) – when it opens

after its [£46m refit](#). Ching Ching will be housed in the Natural Science department.

Animals which are born in the zoo usually have to stay there, since they do not learn wild behaviour in that environment. It can be challenging to repatriate them, although exceptionally earlier this month a beaver family were released into the wild by Edinburgh Zoo to try and reintroduce the species into Scotland.

We're all goin' to the zoo tomorrow, zoo tomorrow, zoo tomorrow... For details of what is on at the Zoo go to our [Events](#) page.