

Tian Tian 'may give birth in a month'



There is a possibility that Tian Tian the female panda at Edinburgh Zoo may be expecting the pitter patter of panda paws in little under a month's time.

The Zoo have put out a statement, although it appears that only the BBC had the opportunity of visiting the zoo and conducting interviews and taking new photographs yesterday:-

"Although it is still early days, the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland (RZSS), can reveal that we are not ruling out that female panda Tian Tian may be pregnant.

A second hormone rise in progesterone levels was detected in Tian Tian on 15th July, and then confirmed on Wednesday 7th August, which indicates she may be pregnant or experiencing a pseudo pregnancy; this means that in around 40 to 55 days Tian Tian will either give birth to a cub or her false pregnancy will end. If there is a cub, it could be born between late August and early September.

In addition, RZSS are also employing separate cutting edge acute protein analysis techniques pioneered by Memphis Zoo, and also used by Washington Zoo. The ground-breaking method has only been used in a few female pandas around the world and has been refined further by RZSS, so it is too early to be classed as definitive or be relied upon; however results do seem to suggest the profile of a pregnant panda that will carry to full term.

Since the artificial insemination, our panda team has continued to monitor Tian Tian closely and at various stages

over the last few months she has shown nesting behaviour, however both pregnant pandas and pandas experiencing a false pregnancy will do this. An ultrasound did not prove possible as they are totally optional and Tian Tian chose not to participate.

We cannot tell definitively at this stage if Tian Tian is pregnant or not, although we are seeing results that give us cause for encouragement. Tian Tian still may be experiencing a pseudo pregnancy, so it is important to remember that and there is still a need to just watch and wait whilst continuing to monitor her hormone levels. Confirming a female panda's pregnancy is never straight forward and we would encourage people to try not to get too excited just yet – I know it is easier said than done though! Further hormone results will be available roughly by mid-August that will add to the picture – if Tian Tian is not pregnant specific hormone levels should drop back down to zero.

Not being able to perform an ultrasound on Tian Tian is not really an issue, it is just part of the picture. Not all ultrasounds detect if a female giant panda is pregnant or not and many are inconclusive, something that our American colleagues have been experiencing quite recently. We much prefer to make the ultrasound optional for Tian Tian, and being the feisty female she is, she has decided she's not up for it!

We are particularly thrilled that RZSS is again at the forefront of pioneering giant panda conservation science and that our results from the analysis of Tian Tian's hormones will retrospectively add to the collective worldwide scientific knowledge.

The panda team at Edinburgh Zoo is monitoring Tian Tian closely and the panda enclosure is open to visitors as normal. I will share more with you as soon as further updates are available."

So what we would like to know is how does a panda 'choose not to participate'? The Zoo managed to capture her and carry out the artificial insemination earlier this year, which is a full blown operation under sedation. How come they can't do an ultrasound?

We shall bring you more news as and when the Zoo issues any updates.