

Keeper shares the secrets of Edinburgh's giant pandas

Scotland's only female giant panda loves to watch zebras – but only when no-one else is looking – it has been revealed.

Giant panda Tian Tian waits until Edinburgh Zoo has closed to visitors before wandering to the top of her outdoor enclosure, where she can watch the Zoo's other iconic black and white attractions.

She also enjoys birdwatching and star gazing, while the male, Yang Guang, has one particularly ticklish foot, it has been revealed.

The pandas' unique characteristics and quirks have been revealed by Alison Maclean, the zookeeper who has got to know the animals better than anyone else during their 12 year stay in Scotland, which will come to an end when they return to China in December.

Alison, who will accompany Yang Guang and Tian Tian – also known as Sunshine and Sweetie – on board their private charter, told how her most joyous moments have been simply watching them enjoy themselves.

She said Yang Guang was “people oriented” and quite different from “quiet” Tian Tian, whose most revealing moments were often when she thinks nobody is looking.

She said: “Yang Guang loves climbing trees, sitting in the fork of the branch and having a look about, and playing in his

pool.

“Tian Tian is a bit more shy but she’s also playful. I love watching her... I’ve seen her go to the top of her enclosure and sit watching the zebras on the other side. She does it a lot at night and we can watch her on the cameras.

“We noticed that she tends to go out more when it’s quiet and she thinks nobody is looking. She’ll wander up there and do her own thing.

“She’s a free spirit. I’ve seen her watching the birds and playfully swiping at butterflies fluttering about. Or she’ll sit up high and look at the stars at night.”

Alison revealed one of Yang Guang’s quirks is an exceptionally ticklish back paw: “On one of his back paws he has a claw that overgrows and so we trained him to allow us to trim it, but his foot is extremely tickly – more than you can imagine.

“I can touch every claw on every other paw and clip them, but this one is so ticklish that he lifts that back foot and puts it behind his ear so I can’t get to it.”

Yang Guang and Tian Tian became the first giant pandas in the UK for 17 years when their special Panda Express cargo plane touched down in Edinburgh in December 2011.

All photos below taken in December 2011 © The Edinburgh Reporter







Alison, 58, had already formed a bond with the animals in China, so that they would have a familiar face to greet them when they arrived in their new home.

She has shared in all their highs and lows, from watching them learn to cooperate in health checks to providing a distraction for Tian Tian after the failure of a pregnancy.

Alison and the zoo's panda team have trained both pandas to undergo everything from dental checks to conscious blood draws, ultrasounds and stethoscope heart monitoring.

And the special bond she forged with Yang Guang enabled vets to identify his testicular cancer in 2018, which ultimately saved him.

She said: "The greatest pleasure is working with them and doing the training because I know that in doing that we are allowing them to participate in their own healthcare.

"It's through that we were able to pick up Yang Guang's cancer. The morning we noticed the abnormality, the vet did a

conscious ultrasound and we were able to see there was a problem and get it dealt with.

“If we hadn’t had that bond and that relationship and training we might not have seen it and it could have spread because it was an aggressive cancer.

“For me, that was the scariest time, until we knew he was fully clear. As time has gone on he has remained clear but there was always that worry. Finding out that he is clear was a wonderful moment and continues to be.”

Yang Guang and Tian Tian arrived in Edinburgh as part of an initial ten-year arrangement between the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland (RZSS), the conservation charity that runs Edinburgh Zoo, and the China Wildlife Conservation Association, under which the RZSS pay the Chinese an annual “donation” of one million dollars – around £750,000.

The RZSS later negotiated a two year extension to the end of this year.

Perhaps the biggest disappointment is that the pair will return to China without having any offspring, despite attempts at natural breeding and artificial insemination since 2013.

Breeding attempts were cancelled in 2020 due to the Covid pandemic and, while there were high hopes of success in 2021 by artificial insemination, no further attempts have been made.

RZSS chief executive David Field said recently that the pair appeared to be a perfect match when they arrived in 2011, but the iconic animals just didn’t click, adding that “if it was Tinder, perhaps Tian Tian wouldn’t have swiped right if she had the choice.”

Alison revealed she has kept a bottle of Champagne ready for almost a decade in anticipation of a cub – and admits she

hasn't quite given up hope.

Tian Tian had twins before coming to Scotland and it remains possible she could yet have another cub, if a more suitable match can be found for her.

Alison said: "My husband bought me a bottle of Champagne about nine years ago because we thought we were definitely on to a winner. It's still sitting unopened.

"I would have loved it for her to have a cub because I know that before she was a great mum.

"Tian Tian was okay with Yang Guang to begin with but it just didn't work. There was a frustration from both animals and that's not a good precursor for animals mating. We and our Chinese colleagues said it isn't going to work between this pair, and that happens.

"Having a cub would have been fantastic but they are amazing individuals in their own right and people have come to love them as Scotland's pandas.

"It's my hope that maybe she'll breed when she goes back. The Champagne is still sitting there. If she has a cub in China I'll open it from afar."

Following a year of farewell events, Alison will accompany the pandas back to China and help them settle into their new homes.

She said: "The point where I have to turn around and walk away for the last time will be difficult.

"But there's still a lot of work to do in the lead up to them going. We need to get them trained for their transport crates, get them comfortable in them and I'm focusing on that side of it.

"But there are Chinese keepers who worked with them for seven

years who haven't seen them for 12 years and now they are coming back. They're going to be really excited to see them again."

[You can watch the pandas on the PandaCam here.](#)



Alison Maclean PHOTO courtesy of RZSS