

Pandas prepare for the fast plane to China

The UK'S only giant pandas are set to go into training for the long journey from their home at Edinburgh back to China.

Fans of Yang Guang and Tian Tian – also known as Sunshine and Sweetie – have just two more weeks to say goodbye to the star attractions at Edinburgh Zoo.

From 30 November, the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland (RZSS), the charity which operates the zoo, will restrict access to the pandas' enclosure as the pair prepare to return to China.

The iconic animals, which both recently celebrated their twentieth birthdays, may then be out of sight as the wildlife conservation charity's keepers "ready the bears for the journey home" in early December.

This will include crate training to help transport the animals away from the zoo and on their charter flight as comfortably as possible.

The animals, which will be accompanied back to China by the Zoo's panda team leader Alison Maclean, arrived in the Scottish capital in 2011 as part of an initial ten-year arrangement with the China Wildlife Conservation Association. The RZSS later negotiated a two year extension to the end of this year.

David Field, RZSS Chief Executive, hailed the animals'

“incredible impact” during their 12 year stay in Scotland.

He said: “With more than a million species at risk of extinction and our natural world in crisis, Yang Guang and Tian Tian have had an incredible impact by inspiring millions of people to care about nature.

“That added interest in the pandas’ departure this year has allowed us to connect many more people with the conservation causes that RZSS is actively involved with, and with nature more generally.

“Through scientific research by our expert veterinary and keeper teams, working alongside the University of Edinburgh, we have made a significant contribution to our understanding around giant panda fertility, husbandry, and veterinary care – which has been of real benefit to efforts to protect this amazing species in China.

“It is encouraging that in recent years the outlook for giant pandas in the wild has improved, which gives real hope for the future.”

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.

The original loan agreement saw the RZSS pay the Chinese an annual “donation” of one million dollars – around £750,000 – amid hopes that the animals would provide an historic cub in Scotland.

Edinburgh’s star attractions will return to China without having any offspring, however, despite attempts at natural breeding and artificial insemination since 2013.

Tian Tian, the female, produced twins prior to coming to Scotland, but annual efforts to produce a cub in Scotland have failed. Yang Guang was diagnosed with testicular cancer in

2018, and was later castrated.

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.

Mr Field said earlier this year 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."

He added: "What I'm really happy about is that they are the happiest, the most content, the most glorious pandas... I've got letters on my desk from people saying how much the pandas have meant to them and that's been hugely important in terms of the value of them being here and people being able to see them."

Despite their failure to breed, the UK's only resident giant pandas have been a huge draw to the Zoo.

A "giant farewell" was announced in January to give fans every chance to say goodbye to the charismatic creatures. A series of events ranged from panda talks and brunch events to £500 behind-the-scenes "Giant Panda Magic Moments" experiences and a bespoke VIP "directors tour" for two including meeting and feeding one of the pandas for £5000. Funds raised will go to help save wildlife in Scotland and around the world from extinction.

Ms Maclean, 58, a zookeeper for 39 years, told recently how she will accompany the animals on their journey back to China. "to help them settle in their new homes".

She added: "Looking after the UK's only pair of giant pandas has been a once in a lifetime experience that most people never have the opportunity to have.

“I’ve probably spent more time with these two pandas than I’ve spent with my family over the past 12 years.”



Yang Guang PHOTO Laurie Campbell



Tian Tian the giant panda



Tian Tian the giant panda