

Pandas devour ice cake to celebrate 50 years at National Zoo

By Ashraf Khalil
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The “cake” was made from frozen fruit juice, sweet potatoes, carrots, and sugar cane and it lasted about 15 minutes once giant panda mama Mei Xiang and her cub Xiao Qi Ji got hold of it.

The National Zoo’s most famous tenants had an enthusiastic breakfast in front of adoring crowds as the zoo celebrated 50 years of its iconic panda exchange agreement with the Chinese government.

Xiao Qi Ji’s father Tian Tian largely sat out the morning festivities, munching bamboo in a neighboring enclosure with the sounds of his chomping clearly audible during a statement by Chinese ambassador Qin Gang. The ambassador praised the bears as “a symbol of the friendship” between the nations.

Pandas are almost entirely solitary by nature, and in the wild Tian Tian would probably never even meet his child. He received a similar cake for lunch.

In addition to hailing the 1972 agreement sparked by President Richard Nixon’s landmark visit to China, the celebration also highlighted the success of the global giant panda breeding program, which has helped bring the bears back from the brink of extinction.



Xiao Qi Ji’s birth in August 2020 was hailed as a near miracle, due to Mei Xiang’s advanced age and the fact that zoo staff performed the artificial insemination procedure under tight restrictions shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic shut the entire zoo. At age 22, Mei Xiang was the oldest giant panda to successfully give birth in the United States.

Normally they would have used a combination of frozen sperm and fresh semen extracted from Tian Tian. But in order to minimize the number of close-quarters medical procedures, zoo officials used only frozen semen.

“It was definitely a long-shot preg-

nancy,” said Bryan Amaral, the zoo’s senior curator for mammals.

In honor of that long shot, the now 20-month-old cub was given a name that translates as “little miracle.” His birth mid-pandemic sparked a fresh wave of panda-mania, with viewership on the zoo’s panda-cam livestream spiking by 1,200 percent.

“I know how passionate people are about pandas,” Amaral said. “I’m not surprised by that passion at all.”

Sure enough, crowds started streaming straight for the panda section at 8:00am when the zoo opened. Sisters Lorelai and Everley Greenwell, ages 6 and 5, ran

50 YEARS OF PANDA DIPLOMACY. Giant panda Mei Xiang eats a fruitsicle cake in celebration of 50 years of achievement by the Smithsonian’s National Zoo and Conservation Biology Institute in the care, conservation, breeding, and study of giant pandas at the Smithsonian’s National Zoo in Washington, D.C. (AP Photo/Jose Luis Magana)

toward the enclosure chanting “Pandas! Pandas!”

They watched the cub tumble around, try to wrestle his mom, and tear the zero off the giant 50 emblazoned on the ice cake.

“They knew this was coming,” their mother, Kayleigh Greenwell of Mount Ranier, Maryland, said of her girls. “We’ve been talking about it all week.”

The zoo’s original 1972 panda pair, Ling-Ling and Hsing-Hsing, were star attractions at the zoo for decades, but panda pregnancies are notoriously tricky and none of their cubs survived.

Mei Xiang and Tian Tian arrived in 2000, and the pair has successfully birthed three other cubs: Tai Shan, Bao Bao, and Bei Bei — also by artificial insemination. All were transported to China at age 4, under terms of the zoo’s agreement with the Chinese government.

Similar agreements with zoos around the world have helped revitalize the giant panda population. Down to just over 1,000 bears in the 1980s, the species has since been removed from the lists of animals in danger of extinction.

Experts say Asian population overcount masks community

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“UCLA was pretty swamped with trying to figure out how to get people their belongings. ... It was a very messy moment and I don’t think I knew anyone that got mail or anything like that,” Chen said. “(The census) is definitely something that I paid attention to, especially with the way that my dad focused on it.”

Tang reported from Phoenix and is a member of The Associated Press’ Race and Ethnicity team.



Birth of endangered Hawaiian monk seal caught on camera

By Audrey McAvoey
The Associated Press

HONOLULU — Images of a Hawaiian monk seal being born on an O’ahu beach have been captured on camera.

An employee of the state Department of Land and Natural Resources shot video and photos of the pup emerging from the mother onto white sands last month.

“As soon as its (amniotic) sac burst, the little one starting wiggling around,” Lesley Macpherson, who works for the department’s Division of State Parks, said in a news release. The mother monk seal checked on her pup by barking as the

Wisconsin woman accused in scheme to defraud Hmong investors

MILWAUKEE (AP) — A Wisconsin woman is accused of leading a scheme to bilk Hmong-American investors mostly from Minnesota and Wisconsin of at least \$16.5 million.

A civil complaint filed by the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) charged Kay Yang, 40, of Mequon, of defrauding about 70 investors between April 2017 and April 2021. Her husband, Chao Yang, 47, is charged as a secondary defendant for improperly receiving proceeds of the fraud.

Investigators said the scheme operated in six other states.

“Some of these investors do not speak English as [their] first language, and some of them were not sophisticated investors,” the complaint said.

Authorities said Kay Yang spent about \$1.5 million on real estate, \$790,000 on living expenses, \$585,000 on travel, and \$313,000 on luxury vehicles for her and her husband, including a Lexus, Tesla, and two BMWs. She had homes in Mequon, Sheboygan, Saukville, as well as Zimmerman, Minnesota.

The couple withdrew about \$1.4 million in investor funds, much of it from ATMs at casinos in Milwaukee, Las Vegas, Atlantic City, and elsewhere, the complaint said.

The SEC seeks to stop Yang and her husband from working as investors and force them to pay penalties and return money to their investors with interest.

Court documents do not list an attorney for the Yangs.

newborn flapped its flippers.

Hawaiian monk seals are an endangered species. There are only about 1,400 seals in the world. About three-quarters of this total live in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, a remote string of small atolls northwest of Hawaii’s populated islands. The rest, about 300 seals, live in the Main Hawaiian Islands including O’ahu and Maui.

The pup, named PO5, was one of two baby seals born on O’ahu in April. Officials

Baton Rouge International School closing after 22 years

BATON ROUGE, La. (AP) — A small private school in Baton Rouge is closing after 22 years of operation, leaving parents looking for a place to enroll their children for next school year.

The Baton Rouge International School blamed a coronavirus pandemic-related drop in enrollment from which it never recovered as a reason for the closing, according to *The Advocate*. The school offered a full multilingual immersion program in English, Spanish, French, and Chinese. It is part of a global network of 50 schools known as the International Schools Partnership.

“It is ... with deep and heartfelt sadness that I write to tell you that Baton Rouge International School will permanently close at the end of this school year,” read a letter sent to parents last month.

The last day of classes is May 26. The closure announcement was made after most other private schools had already enrolled students for next year.

“We’re stabbing in the dark hoping we might get on a wait list,” said Dawn DePorter-Kimmence, who has two children at the school. She told the newspaper she’s still hoping a benefactor will save the school.

She said her children can communicate in French and Spanish and also know some Chinese. And she said the school provided challenging lessons in regular subjects.

“You don’t get exposure to that everywhere,” she said. “It sets them up in life for success that not everyone has access to.”

Enrollment at pre-K through 12th-grade school declined from 309 students in fall 2019 to 188 students in February, according to the Louisiana Department of Education.

and volunteers will actively monitor the moms and their pups until weaning in about five to six weeks. After weaning, officials will aim to tag the pups and may apply temporary satellite transmitters to the seals to help keep track of them.

Three other pups born on O’ahu this year died from complications related to birth, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration said.

Ryan Jenkinson, who leads the state’s protected species program, said it’s important for people to stay outside roped barriers set up to safeguard the mothers and their pups. He urged people to keep their dogs on leashes at all times.

Department of Consumer & Business Services



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