

Pandas mate with help at the National Zoo

U.S. veterinarians have artificially inseminated Mei Xiang, a female giant panda at the Smithsonian's National Zoo, after natural mating was unsuccessful.

Zoo staff said they carefully observed each attempted mating between Mei Xiang and Tian Tian, a male giant panda, and when satisfactory mating did not occur, veterinarians performed a non-surgical artificial insemination last Wednesday. Both pandas were anesthetized, allowing scientists to collect sperm from Tian Tian and insert it directly into Mei Xiang's uterus.

Giant pandas have one very brief breeding season per year, with only a day or two of actual mating.

Zoo staff members said the pandas will remain separated for the next few months until Mei Xiang either delivers a cub, or until scientists determine she is not pregnant. Keeping the pandas apart will reduce the risk of increased stress hormone levels in Mei Xiang, which could jeopardize ovulation, conception and implantation, officials said.

Veterinarians will monitor Mei Xiang's hormone levels and perform ultrasounds to determine whether she becomes pregnant.

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