



PICKING UP PANDAS

BY KIM HADDIX

It is well known around the Zoo that all you have to say is “Kim, do you want to go...” and the rest of the sentence doesn’t matter, the answer is yes, please! Last week was no different. “Kim, do you want to drive down to pick up two red pandas from the Nashville Zoo?” “Yes, please!” On Wednesday, Sept. 19 Zoo photographer, Corey Wyckoff, keeper Koral Stoddard and curator of mammals, Michael Frushour and I set off in two cars on the 7 hour drive from Toledo to Nashville. During our drive, Corey and I researched the Nashville Zoo at Grassmere and found out it is located on an old plantation and the most popular feature is their kangaroo petting area. We arrived first and were greeted with incredible southern hospitality and draws. The staff told us to have a look around while we waited and handed us a map. We made a beeline for the kangaroo area and were beyond delighted to be in the presence of these amazing creatures. Most were dug into small holes for naps, while one slept on a raised dog-like hammock bed and another slept in a patch of shade on the sidewalk. We watched some other visitors approach the one in the shade, pet her and take their pictures with her. We quickly followed suit and were amazed by how soft she was and her cuter-than-cute pork chop sideburns. As enthralled as we were, we knew there was more to see though. The next exhibit that caught our attention was the gibbon island where the siamangs and gibbons were calling what sounded like the Hallelujah chorus! Just about this time my phone rang and brought us back to reality. Koral and Michael had arrived.

We walked back to the front of the Zoo and met them in the Administration offices. After introductions between staffs, we went with Purjita, their red panda keeper to meet the two cute red-heads we would be escorting to Toledo. As we walked through a series of circular paths shaded by giant bamboo shoots, she shared more about her job and the animals she cared for. Much to Koral’s delight, we stopped at several small primate exhibits, including spider monkeys, red-tufted lemurs, ring-tailed lemurs and red pandas. At red pandas, we went behind a fence into their off-exhibit holding area. In the small building, were two red panda living areas, complete with perching, fresh bamboo and nesting boxes with the front doors removed. Purjita told us the primate staff had kept our two females, Kiaria and Misa, inside in hopes they would get in their crates for easy transport. It was then that we got the first look at their cute faces and distinct personalities, one shy (Misa) and one super-curious (Kiaria). As we stood taking them in, Purjita gave us more information about their living space, including their preferred dehumidifier and air conditioning settings, knack for chewing and scratching their nesting boxes and more. She also told us the girls are twins and just over a year old; they were born June 16, 2017 at the Nashville Zoo and their parents were currently in the outdoor red panda exhibit. She pointed out that we could tell them apart because Kiaria is very dark in color while Misa has a much lighter face and is bigger (about 16 pounds). After we took a few pictures and committed their names to memory, we discussed their actual trip to Toledo. Both zoos had provided large pet carriers for the drive. The animal staffs discussed bedding options, water and dietary needs. It was agreed that we would meet the next morning to make the swap and get the girls on their way to their new home.

At this point Purjita turned us over to Shawna, Nashville’s curator of mammals. Shawna proceeded to give us a several-hour guided tour of the Zoo, showing us with pride their new Andean bear exhibit and the still under construction tiger exhibit. We ended our tour in the gift shop, where several red panda face magnets were (appropriately) purchased to commemorate the trip. After we thanked Shawna and her staff for an amazing afternoon, Michael and Koral escorted her to vet hospital where they would meet the red pandas in the morning. Corey and I headed to our hotel with plans to meet up with Michael and Koral downtown later. Being good tourists, we headed to Broadway Street to take in the sights, sounds and eats. After enjoying a good southern meal, live music and a rooftop view of the city, we all called it an evening.

The next morning at 7:30 a.m., we all met back up behind the veterinary hospital of Nashville Zoo. We planned on loading the red pandas into the Toledo Zoo vehicle with Michael and Koral and getting on the road by 8 a.m. However, the red pandas had other plans, as they did not crate as quickly as the keepers had hoped. Finally, the two traveling pandas arrived in separate pet carriers lined with wood wool and were loaded into the back of the Zoo SUV, where the air conditioning was blasting a chilly 60 degrees. When their crates were in motion, the pandas expressed their uncertainty by making an almost pig like snort, called a bark. (We learned later that a singular noise is a bark and a group of noises is called a quack.) After water bottles were attached to each crate and the day’s diet and treats handed over, the red pandas and Toledo Zoo crew departed Nashville about 9 a.m. Thankfully, Koral and Michael brought extra layers to bundle up for the 7 hours home with the air conditioning on full strength to keep the pandas comfortable. We checked in with each other along the route and Koral said Kiaria rested most of the way home, but Misa was a bit antsy, barking each time they hit a big bump.



Once we got back to the Toledo Zoo, we unloaded the red pandas at our off-exhibit vet area. They were each carried into a joint holding area set up with perching and fresh bamboo, where they would remain for a few days while tests were completed to ensure they didn't have any diseases, parasites or anything else that could be passed along to our current resident pandas. It didn't take long for both girls to climb out of their crates and settle in to their temporary home.

That following weekend, Kiaria and Misa moved into Primate Forest, where they met our current red panda, Kiah. Koral and Corey reported that the introductions went well and the three are now cohabitating in the outdoor exhibit. Koral said Kiaria was very curious of Kiah and followed her around for almost the entire first day, while Misa was more relaxed and spent most of her time in (and chewing on) the rope cargo net.

Now is the perfect time to come see the new girls on exhibit. The temperatures are cooling down and the girls are settled in and will be more active. Come see our cute new Nashville transplants!