

HIGHEST NUMBER OF BIRTHS IN A YEAR

6 red panda cubs born at Sikkim zoo over 2 months

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Siliguri: Sikkim's Himalayan Zoological Park has recorded six red panda births in June and July, making it the highest number in a year since the park started its captive breeding programme in 1996.

Five of the six cubs, born between June and July this year, have survived. The red panda population there is currently 13.

Sangay Gyatso, director of the Himalayan Zoological Park, said this was the first time since the captive breeding programme started in 1996 that six red pandas had been born in a year.

"There were a total of six red pandas born in June and July this year under our captive breeding programme of red pandas and of them five managed to survive. This is a major achievement for us for the conservation of the endangered species, as this was the first time such a large number of pandas were born in a single year," Gyatso told The Telegraph over the phone on Sunday.

The Himalayan Zoological Park is located at Bulbulay, around three



Red pandas at the Himalayan Zoological Park of Sikkim. Picture courtesy: The Himalayan Zoological Park

kilometres from Gangtok and some 6,000 feet above sea level.

Zoo officials said they had not disclosed the red panda births immediately because the first two months are considered particularly critical for the survival of the cubs.

The animals were kept away from public attention and under constant observation of veterinarians and dedicated zoo staff.

"The first two months after the birth of the pandas are considered the 'most critical period' for their survival, as the survival rate is merely 40 to 50 per cent. Keeping this in view, we kept the animals under close vigil of the vets and

some of our dedicated staff and finally disclosed their birth on Saturday," Gyatso said.

Of the five surviving cubs, officials have so far identified one as male and another as female.

The sex of the remaining three is yet to be determined because of the reclusive and delicate nature of the animals.

Of the 13 red pandas housed at the zoo, six are female and four are male.

The park's captive breeding initiative has come a long way despite setbacks. Between 2015 and 2017, 12 red pandas at the park had died after being infected with canine distemper.

A state forest and environment department official said Sikkim is estimated to have around 300 red pandas in the wild, the second-highest population in the country after Arunachal Pradesh.

Spread over around 230 hectares, the Himalayan Zoological Park currently houses 92 animals belonging to 13 species. These include Himalayan black bears, Himalayan gorals, Himalayan tahrs, clouded leopards and vultures.