



ASIAN ELEPHANT SUKI: THE QUEEN OF THE BARN

Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium celebrates Suki's 59th birthday Sept. 22-24

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TACOMA, Wash.—Suki, the Asian elephant, is celebrating her 59th birthday this weekend, Sept. 22-24, at Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium, and guests are invited to join the festivities.

She's a super-senior among Asian elephants and a superstar to everyone who cares for her. That rings particularly true for Elephant Manager Shannon Smith, who's cared for the elderly elephant for over 27 years.

"You can't talk about Suki without mentioning Shannon, and vice versa," said Dr. Karen Wolf, the zoo's head veterinarian.

Like any besties, Smith and Suki have long daily chats. When Suki sees Smith enter the barn, she begins to rumble and make squeaking noises. She knows Smith is about to greet her with head rubs, face scratches, and a good conversation. A sign on the elephant barn window reads: "If you hear loud noises, it's just Suki excited to see her pal, Shannon!"

The zoo has a dedicated team of five full-time and three part-time keepers who care for Suki. Each of them is highly qualified and extremely passionate about the intelligent elephant.

"All of Suki's keepers know her exceptionally well and are always in tune with her moods and movements, which helps the veterinary staff care for her as well," said Dr. Wolf.

Suki is one of the oldest Asian elephants in the country and has already lived far beyond the median life expectancy of 47 for female Asian elephants in human care. She has chronic medical conditions, including tuberculosis, arthritis, and uterine tumors (similar to fibroids). As Suki gets older, Smith, Dr. Wolf, and the rest of Suki's care team continually adapt their routines to meet her needs.

"Suki has a team of professionals from almost every zoo department who meet monthly to discuss Suki's health and well-being," said Dr. Wolf. "From the zoo director and conservation engagement curator to Suki's keepers and veterinarians, there are so many people who care deeply about Suki."

The group focuses solely on all things Suki and ensuring she continues to receive the highest level of care.

Suki also has a large fan club outside of her care team. Millions of guests have traveled to Tacoma over the years to meet this extraordinary elephant.

“Suki loves the attention and rightfully considers herself to be the queen of the barn,” said Smith.

Like any queen, Suki receives fresh fruit and veggies daily, plenty of mental stimulation, and regular spa treatments. Smith and other members of the elephant care team pay close attention to Suki’s nails, give her baths and foot soaks, and even apply special ointment to any dry skin.

“In addition to her freshwater pools and drinkers, we offer her warm water from ‘her hose’ several times a day, and she seems to enjoy that,” said Smith.

Keepers spend an hour each day prepping Suki’s food so it doesn’t need chewing and is easier for her to digest: chopping, thinly slicing, and mashing her veggies and fruit. Elephants wear through six sets of teeth during their lifetimes, and Suki has appropriately worn through all of them. Suki’s hay is pre-chopped and packed by the team into overnight feeders that offer her timed grazing. An elephant eats both day and night.

An entire zoo area is devoted to growing the kinds of trees that make great elephant munching: willow, maple, and banana leaves. In total, Suki enjoys 22 different fruits and vegetables. It’s all part of a healthy diet, with the occasional treat like a vegan apple pie or triple berry pie for her birthday.

Suki’s keepers also lead her in daily stretching sessions to help her stay fit and flexible.

“We ask her to do a wide range of exercises every day,” explained Smith. “We do leg lifts, trunk lifts, bows (flexing one foot), and salute (lifting one foot and trunk). We also do balancing exercises where she lifts her right front foot and back left foot for a couple of seconds, sets them down, and then switches to the other set of feet.”

Suki actively participates in her health care, presenting her feet, trunk, ears, and open mouth to her care team so they can examine her daily and swiftly address any health issues. That’s particularly important with elderly elephants, who, like humans, can develop more medical issues as they age.

“She is a very quick learner and enjoys the opportunity to try new behaviors,” said Smith.

The zoo veterinarians assess Suki’s bloodwork a minimum of six times a year and offer medications like acetaminophen to help her with any discomfort or stiffness associated with her arthritis. Suki’s animal care team also recently began laser treatment (a form of light therapy) on Suki to help with her mobility and stiffness around the joints in her legs. SpectraVET, the company that manufactures the laser, even made a special one just for Suki with a larger surface area so her treatment takes less time.

Suki generally has access to her entire habitat, including both inside her barn and outside in her yard.

“She gets to enjoy her retirement however she wishes,” said Smith.

Smith, Dr. Wolf, and her entire animal care team agree they cherish all the moments spent with Suki.

“There’s nothing like spending time with your best friend,” said Smith. “I am incredibly lucky.”

CELEBRATE SUKI’S 59TH BIRTHDAY: Sept. 22-24

Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium will celebrate Suki’s 59th birthday on Sept. 22-24. Suki will receive a special birthday pie each day during the daily elephant keeper chat at 1 p.m. Zoo guests are invited to sign a giant birthday card for Suki (12 p.m.-2:30 p.m. each day).

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Media Contacts

Tessa Miller, 253-331-5858 or tessa.miller@pdza.org

Whitney DalBalcon, 253-278-6343 or whitney.dalbalcon@pdza.org