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Zoo to You: Red Panda Cubs

After spending a few months with mom, the red panda cubs recently ventured away from their indoor nest to their outdoor habitat. If you haven't seen the video of the cubs' big outing, you should follow our Facebook page or visit our YouTube channel to watch the adorableness, just search for Lee Richardson Zoo. Staff and public have been eagerly awaiting the first public appearance of the brothers for months, but there are good reasons as to why mother red pandas keep their young in the nest for so long.

While red pandas are in the carnivore order they are truly omnivores, eating plants as well as protein like grubs, their diet is primarily composed of bamboo, a low nutrient grass. Compared to other mammals, female red pandas have relatively low- volume and low- nutrient quality milk which causes the cubs to develop at a slow rate.

By two weeks of age, the average red panda cub weighs in around .07 ounces! The cubs are not strong enough or capable of consuming solid food until they are around 125-135 days old. At this point, they no longer rely solely on mom's milk and can start consuming a variety of food items, giving them more nutrients. As they eat more solid food, the cubs become strong and big enough to start exploring outside their nest.

At first, the cubs will spend short periods of time away from the safety of the nest. With time, they will start pushing their climbing abilities, and as they become stronger, they will spend more time out exploring. Since the cubs are just starting to explore away from the nest, they will frequently go back in to rest. With time, the brothers will be visible more frequently throughout the day, but for now, you will have to practice a little patience if they are not outdoors when you visit because these young boys still need their nap times. If you're worried about not seeing them before winter, when temperatures send many animals into shelters, don't worry, because red pandas are adapted for living in the cool and wet conditions of a mountain forest. A Kansas winter won't keep them indoors; in fact, they prefer the cold. The red panda family is a great option to visit in the colder months when warm weather species are less visible.

Not only does their long development keep the cubs in the nest longer, but it impacts their population as well. The slow growth rate for the cubs forces them to stay with mom for a longer period of time, and in turn, the mother red panda can't have her next set of cubs until the last set is grown. This slows down population growth making it harder for red panda populations to bounce back after population declines. Currently, red pandas are facing multiple threats that are causing their population to shrink. For red pandas to thrive in nature, their habitat requirements are fairly strict, limiting what elevation, gradient, and forest type they can tolerate; finding this specific habitat is becoming harder as people expand villages into more remote areas of Asia. Red pandas are also susceptible to canine distemper, which is lethal to the species. As their habitat becomes more fragmented and they are exposed to a denser population of humans, and conversely domesticated dogs, red pandas are at greater risk of falling victim to the disease. Poaching for fur or the pet trade is also an issue for red pandas; this increasing demand is possibly driven by their popularity in social media. All of these issues combined with their slow reproductive rates have led to a population decline of at least 50% between 2012 and 2015. For this reason, the IUCN Red List for Threatened Species listed red pandas as endangered in 2015.

Hope is not lost for this species though. Breeding programs, like the one at Lee Richardson Zoo, are working hard as a part of a Species Survival Plan to make sure there is a large and healthy population of red pandas in facilities accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums. Plus, you can always visit [redpandanetwork.org](http://redpandanetwork.org) and donate to support conservation efforts. Donating to conservation groups, like the Red Panda Network, is a great gift idea for the animal lover who has everything. Be a champion for endangered red pandas this holiday season and give the gift of conservation.