

Rescued pangolin paves way for repopulation plan



WRS director assistant director Serena Oh and nutritionist Francis Cabana with Sandshrew last Thursday. The baby Sunda pangolin was found alone in January at a construction site. ST PHOTO: MARK CHEONG

WRS staff play mother to orphaned baby, teaching it how to eat and hunt

Audrey Tan

After three months of rehabilitation, an orphaned baby pangolin rescued by Wildlife Reserves Singapore (WRS) will go home to the wilderness in a few months.

But Sandshrew will continue to be monitored after its release into the forests here, where wild Sunda pangolins roam. Sandshrew was named for its resemblance to the character in computer game Pokemon.

Its health and movements will be tracked by scientists, researchers and veterinarians, who hope that Sandshrew's rehabilitation could be a model for an eventual pangolin re-introduction programme.

The Night Safari, one of four wildlife parks managed by WRS, has nine Sunda pangolins – five females and four males. The hope is that some of the offspring could eventually help to repopulate Singapore's forests.

Sunda pangolins are critically endangered animals, with habitat loss and poaching driving them to the brink of extinction. Last year, there were only an estimated 100 wild pangolins in Singapore.

"We have rescued and released injured pangolins before, but those pangolins have already been weaned off their mother's milk," said Dr Serena Oh, assistant director of conservation, research and veterinary services at WRS. Sandshrew is different – it was still a baby and dependent on its mother's milk when it was rescued.

"Baby pangolins usually pick up skills essential for survival, such as climbing trees and foraging for ants, by observing their mothers,"

said Dr Oh. But Sandshrew was found alone in January at a construction site in Upper Thomson. It is not clear what happened to its mother.

At that time, Sandshrew, a male, weighed just about 500g. Dr Oh estimated its age to be 1.5 months old.

Adult Sunda pangolins can grow up to the size of a domestic cat, with males weighing about 11kg and females 7kg, Dr Oh said.

A newborn pangolin is reliant on its mother for milk and protection, said Dr Norman Lim T-Lon, a pangolin researcher and lecturer at the natural sciences and science education academic group at the National Institute of Education.

"It would even follow the mother by clinging onto her tail when the mother is out foraging."

Sandshrew was initially difficult to feed, said Dr Oh. It would curl up into a defensive ball at the start of the feed, a defence mechanism for the world's only scaly mammal. When it does that, its hard scales, made of the same stuff as human fingernails, envelopes all its soft parts.

"When introducing the artificial teat, we had to open its mouth for it to take it. Even then, it did so for a very short time," she said.

Because it drank only about 2ml each time, she had to hand-feed it throughout the day. After the first week, Sandshrew drank about 70ml at each suckle and is now on a special diet comprising ant eggs. Dr Oh also started taking Sandshrew out for daily walks, so it could learn to climb trees and forage for food.

Dr Lim said pangolins feed exclusively on ants and termites and have to dig and climb to reach ant nests, such as those on trees, and break open termite mounds.

Singapore's Night Safari is one of only four zoos in the world that have successfully kept pangolins, and the only one to rear Sunda pangolins. The animals are tricky to keep as they are picky eaters, said Dr Francis Cabana, WRS' wildlife nutritionist. But the pangolins in the Night Safari have taken to WRS' formula, and a sign of its success is that they are now breeding.

Pangolins at the Night Safari first bred successfully in 2011, and there have been five successful births since. Said Dr Cabana: "The research we are doing with our pangolin diets hopefully will help us and other rescue centres to rehabilitate and release more pangolins."

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UNIQUE CASE

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DR SERENA OH, assistant director of veterinary services at WRS, on orphaned Sandshrew's unique case.

Video: Meet Sandshrew, the baby pangolin
str.sg/sandshrew

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