



DETROIT NEWS: KIYA GIBBONS

Como Zoo's Neil frolics in his temporary home at the Detroit Zoo. He and his twin, Buzz, have moved while the St. Paul zoo undertakes a \$14.5 million renovation of its Polar Bear Odyssey exhibit, set to reopen in 2010.

'Our boys' settling in

Como Zoo's polar bears are exploring and otherwise making themselves at home in Detroit.

By Alex Friedrich > afriedrich@pioneerpress.com

It's been just over a month since Buzz and Neil moved to the Detroit Zoo, and already they're being referred to there as "the boys."

Thanks a bunch for taking them in, Motor City.

Don't forget, though: They're *our* boys. So just don't get too attached to them.

The twins have been lounging there since April 4, when they arrived in crates from their old pad at Como.

They'll stay in Detroit while the Como Zoo completes a major renovation of its polar bear exhibit over the next two years. Buzz and Neil are now out in

public, having just become legit. They had to stay in quarantine for their first month while the docs checked them for parasites and disease. (They weren't doubting their hygiene. It's standard procedure.)

"We're really glad to have them here," said Scott Carter, director of conservation and animal welfare at the Detroit Zoo. "The arrival of an animal is a big deal."

Transporting them was no quick trip to the mall. Como officials gave themselves three months to prepare for the big move. The key was training the bears to go willingly into their transport crates.

As Como Zoo trainer Cindy Swanson said, "You can't force a polar bear to do a whole lot."

Online: To see more photos of Buzz and Neil, go to twincities.com.

POLAR BEARS, 5B >





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“It’s all pretty exciting for Buzz and Neil,” Como Zoo trainer Cindy Swanson said, referring to the polar bears, pictured in their temporary digs at the Detroit Zoo, Neil at left and Buzz at right. The bears are exploring their new digs and will be able to carouse with the females during their two-year stay while Como renovates its bear exhibit.

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➤ Polar bears

That meant getting each of the big lugs accustomed to his crate, which is about 8 feet long, 4 feet wide and 5 feet high and made with 2-inch-square mesh.

“They don’t know why this is here (in their living space) and think (we) might be up to something,” she said.

It might be tempting just to tranquilize them, but Swanson said the health risks outweigh the effort of training.

Staffers secured a cage next to an entrance the bears regularly use and left it there for them to check out.

After a week, the bears seemed at ease with it, so trainers began using commands, hand signals and rewards to get the bears to try out the crates.

(Buzz and Neil dig lard and fat from beef and horses. And romaine lettuce. Go figure.)

Pretty soon “they were very comfortable in there,” Swanson said.

About 1 p.m. April 3, Swanson and three staffers from the Detroit Zoo loaded each bear into a crate. Then a forklift loaded the crates into a moving van — a scary proposition even for animals of that size. The swaying of the truck didn’t help, either.

Buzz and Neil “were very nervous at first,” Swanson said.

The van made it through several tolls on the 14-hour drive — no one figured out the cargo — and the crew arrived about 3 a.m. in Detroit.

Staffers opened the crates into separate rooms so each bear could mellow out. Within minutes, Swanson said, the bears started whimpering. Swanson knew they were lonely for each other.

“They were sniffing all over the place,” Swanson said. “They knew there were other bears around. They were brothers, and they knew (the other was) there. They just wanted to get back together.”

So they were put together, and within the hour, each was munching on about 10 pounds of herring.

How trainers talk to Buzz and Neil

Detroit Zoo personnel are learning the hand signals and commands that Como trainers use to tell the twins what to do.



Stay!



Set up! (Bear should come, sit and focus on the trainer)



Circle! (Bear circles around so trainers can check all sides.)



Paw! (Bear extends a paw — left or right depending on signal — so trainers can check its paw and claws for problems.)



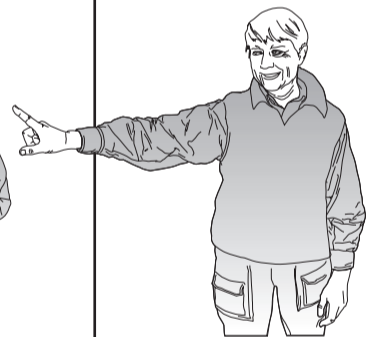
Open! (Bear opens his mouth for a dental check.)



Rise! (Bear gets up on hind legs and fully extends itself. Trainers check out his tummy.)



Down! (Bear should hunker down with his head forward and down, so trainers can look at the back of his neck.)



Crate! (Bear should walk into the crate. To get the bear to move to a particular point, a trainer says, **Shift!**)

Source: Como Zoo

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Since then, said Michelle Seldon, Detroit’s associate curator of mammals, they’ve been “pretty easy-going and pretty laid-back, as bears go.”

Their quarantine area had two to three 20-square-foot rooms with a skylight, small pool and large window for staff observation.

They’ve had hay to sleep in and balls to play with. And they liked to sniff the vents, Swanson said, because they carry the smells of animals in other parts of the complex.

They’ve gotten a lot of attention. Staffers are keeping an eye on them, and experts have collected their poop to analyze in the lab for parasites.

The zoo has three bears — Talini, a 3½-year-old female; Bärle, Talini’s 24-year-old

mother; and Norton, a 23-year-old male.

Buzz and Neil were scheduled to meet Talini, who’s staying alone for the time being because her mom is trying to mate with Norton in another part of the habitat. (That’s right. Beat it, kid.)

They’re also meeting Bärle — but not Norton.

At almost 1,100 pounds, Norton’s a hoss compared with Neil’s 950 pounds and Buzz’s

760. And if he feels territorial, he could try to pound the kids.

Because they’re spending only two years together, Seldon said, the zoo will just keep them separate.

Still, “it’s all pretty exciting for Buzz and Neil,” Swanson said. “There are so many things to do and explore. It’s an exciting time of their lives.”

Como trainers will keep tabs on the boys by talking with Detroit’s trainers, getting status reports and making occasional visits.

In the meantime, workers back in St. Paul will construct Como’s \$14.5 million Polar Bear Odyssey exhibit, scheduled to open in 2010.

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