



Press Release

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Cochrane Polar Bears go “wild” on snow hills.

Cochrane, Ontario – February 12, 2013 – Polar Bears these days. It’s tough to keep them happy. So, how do you make captive polar bears play like their wild counterparts? Build them a “Super Polar Snow Slide”.

According to Zookeepers at the Cochrane Polar Bear Habitat, a big snow hill the bears can dig into, run up and slide down is just the ticket to keep their polar bears busy on cold winter days.

“When I asked Greg Shanks, owner of Allan’s Home Hardware in Cochrane if he might build snow hills for our polar bears with his Bobcat on tracks, he didn’t hesitate,” said Polar Bear Habitat Manager, Karen Cummings. “He said, ‘I’d love to do that for you’, just like that.” Greg built 12’ high snow hills in two of the habitat’s enclosures.

But even though the snow hills provide an endless supply of hilarity for both polar bears and visitors alike – they’re actually much more than that. They’re another opportunity for the Habitat to give their polar bears an experience like they’d get in the wild ... and a chance to act like ... well, polar bears.

“In the wild male polar bears dig into snow drifts and hills to shelter overnight, while the females may build dens in them. But often they’ll just amuse themselves on them – run to the top, take a flying leap, land spread eagle and slide down. You’ll see them do this again and again just for fun.”

Any opportunity to study polar bears doing things they would naturally do in the wild is an added bonus in a captive environment, as, according to Cummings, it’s a lot more cost effective than trying to follow them in their arctic homes. “We pride ourselves in giving our polar bears an environment that’s as close as possible to the wild. Not only is our sub-arctic location great, but we have the added benefit of still being accessible to anyone who may want to study how captive polar bears might learn wild skills, or their behaviours. There are very, very few captive polar bear locations in the world that could build their bears a snow hill – or watch their bears break ice on their pool. We want to take advantage of all the things we have in our favour and expand on them.”

And Ganuk, a three year old male polar bear, seems to agree. On his first outing with the snow hill he dug a shelter in the side, and started lying on it spread eagle. By the third time... he was full-on sliding. “He was on his back, sliding down the hill head first. We just couldn’t believe how funny he was,” said Habitat Zookeepers.

The bear’s wild inclinations also seem to spark on the frozen pool. Staff watched Ganuk break ice by pushing up and down on it at the pool’s edge. “He was a little shocked when it broke and he fell in, but once he recovered and pulled himself out, he was back at it again in seconds.”

“We can accommodate ice on our pool because we’ve installed an aeration system very similar to what they used to make breathing holes and rescue the whales that were caught in the arctic,” said Cummings. “It’s something else our facility has that most others don’t – the ability for polar bears to encounter ice on water.”



Another great thing about building snow hills for polar bears? They likely won't melt all the way till the end of May, giving the bears access to snow for a longer amount of time. "Most people are counting the days till all the snow has gone ... especially with the recent storms, but not us, we're glad to see it stay as long as it can," Cummings joked.

The Cochrane Polar Bear Habitat is open seven days a week from 10 am to 4 pm during the winter months, and from 9 am to 5 pm during the summer.

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