

PRECIOUS CARGO



A Tiger's Journey to the Rosamond Gifford Zoo

How do you get a 450-pound adult male tiger from Colorado Springs, CO, to Syracuse, NY? Very carefully.

On Wednesday, December 4, as the Rosamond Gifford Zoo was closing for the day, a seven-member team from the zoo set out on an important mission. Their assignment: meet a FedEx plane carrying precious cargo – a 9-year-old Amur tiger named Thimbu – and transport the big cat safely to his new home in Syracuse.

By the time the plane landed in Rochester, Thimbu (pronounced “Tim-boo”) had traveled 1,600 miles by air, accompanied by two of his former animal care team from the Cheyenne Mountain Zoo (CMZ) in Colorado Springs.

While zookeepers at nationally accredited facilities always keep animal welfare top of mind, transporting an animal to another location is “probably the most nerve-wracking thing they do,” said Rosamond Gifford Zoo Director Ted Fox.

“We all know that a lot can go wrong when we travel,” Fox said, “so, we plan every detail and have contingency plans for any issues that may arise. We maintain strict safety protocols for transporting a wild animal.”

Thimbu’s arrival would be especially significant because the zoo recently lost both of its elderly tigers, Toma and Tatiana, who were nearly 20 years old when they passed away within weeks of each other this past fall.

The Amur Tiger Species Survival Plan then recommended Thimbu come to Syracuse to be paired with a new female in the next few months. Amur tigers are critically endangered in their native Far East Russia, where fewer than 500 exist in the wild.

Welcoming Thimbu involved intense planning with CMZ, the Amur Tiger SSP, FedEx, TSA and our own Team Thimbu, which included General Curator Dan Meates, Collection Managers Seth Groesbeck and Ashley Sheppard, zookeepers Theo Campbell, Tyler Mesick and Leisje Meates, and Cornell veterinarian Dr. Rebecca Eddy.

FedEx staff secure Thimbu's crate at their cargo terminal in Rochester.



On the appointed day, the team left Syracuse about 4:15 p.m. Rain, snow and rush hour traffic slowed their drive to Rochester, but they arrived at the FedEx terminal in time to see the plane carrying Thimbu dock and unload.

They watched from a distance as a giant flatbed cargo lift rose about 15 feet to the plane's cargo hold and a crew gently eased the huge steel crate carrying Thimbu onto the lift. Once lowered, a FedEx crew used a forklift to place the crate onto a cargo tractor, called a tug.

Routine unloads involve four people on the tarmac, but word of the precious cargo had spread among FedEx staff, so about 30 people gathered hoping to catch a glimpse. A FedEx manager narrated the process for our team -- stating the total weight of crate, pallet, netting and tiger exceeded 600 pounds and remarking, "That's a big kitty cat!"

As the tug drove into the hangar, FedEx crews shut all doors, closing staff and cargo inside. TSA also monitored the unloading process, "so we had to stay really close together and behave ourselves," Leisje said.

As it drove toward them, Ashley noticed the tug ferrying Thimbu had the word TIGER on the front. It turned out the cargo tug was a model Tiger TC50.

Although the team was well-prepared to lift the crate into their van, they were grateful when FedEx offered its forklift for the task. Soon, Thimbu's crate was secured in the back of the van, and Dan, Ashley, Leisje and vet Becky strapped in around it while Seth took the wheel for the trip back to Syracuse.

During all this, "the tiger never made a peep," Ashley said. "He was extremely calm, even while being lifted," Tyler said.

The team from CMZ picked up their rental car, then followed our team to Syracuse to help get Thimbu into his new home.

In the van, our team was amazed to find Thimbu so relaxed that he took a nap. "Our ride back was almost eerie because of how quiet he was," Ashley said. "He was six inches from our backs and we were continually checking to make sure he was OK."

They arrived around 9:15 p.m.; Zoo Director Ted was there to meet them. They guided the van off-road through mud and ice to get up close to the tiger building. This time, they had no forklift – luckily the crate had handlebars on the sides. Ted and the other seven keepers lifted Thimbu's crate to the ground, then carried it inside.

"We were excited, but we had to stay as quiet as we could and keep the lights dim to make sure Thimbu stayed calm," Leisje said. "We had to line the crate door up with the shift doors, and we needed him to walk through into his holding area."

A big concern is getting the tiger to exit the crate. "The last tiger I moved refused to leave his crate for eight hours," Leisje said. "We were expecting the worst - and it didn't happen."

When they opened the doors, Thimbu immediately walked through, sniffed around his new den and lay down.

"It proved he really is a mellow cat, because if he was charging or moving around it would have been another story," Ted added. "Thanks to Thimbu, it all went really well."



Photo courtesy of Cheyenne Mountain Zoo

Meet Thimbu!

Thimbu was one of quadruplet cubs born at the Denver Zoo in 2010. He lived there with his brother Nikolai until last year, when he moved to the Cheyenne Mountain Zoo. Keepers there quickly fell in love with him, but the Amur tiger Species Survival Plan recommended he come to Syracuse to be paired with a new female (coming soon) from Connecticut's Beardsley Zoo.

Here are some Thimbu fun facts from our friends at CMZ:

- Thimbu's nickname is "Thim" and he's a big boy, weighing about 450 pounds.
- His distinctive markings include a freckled nose and charcoal-gray coloring near the tip of his tail.
- He is known for rolling around on his back like a cub and vocalizations that sound like moaning and "huffing" in addition to the usual tiger "chuff."
- He loves scents including Prada perfume and the smell of fresh-brewed coffee.

Thimbu can be seen at the Amur tiger exhibit from now on. Come see him at the zoo!