



KALI: A Polar Bear's Tale

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Chapter Eight:

In the 1920s, the Saint Louis Zoo built some of the nation's first naturalistic bear habitats by creating rocky grottos from molds of nearby Missouri bluffs. Other zoos followed this example, inspiring a new generation of zoo habitats.

Nearly a century later, these original bear grottos needed upgrades. The Saint Louis Zoo built a \$16 million polar bear habitat with two freshwater pools, two filled with saltwater, a coast-like terrain, a sandy beach and an area of grass. Add a climate-controlled building with polar bear bedrooms and the Zoo's Polar Bear Point became a beautiful, 21st century upgrade, a new model for bear care. All it needed was a polar bear.

Kali, a wild-born, Alaskan polar bear, was the responsibility of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). Its officials decided the Saint Louis Zoo's newly designed polar bear habitat was the perfect permanent home for the young bear.

Kali had been shy and cautious when he first arrived in Buffalo from the many changes in this life. But playing with Luna had helped Kali grow to become a confident, strong bear, ready for any challenge. Caitlyn would miss the boisterous adolescent bear, but also knew he had a bright future ahead of him.

So, how does an 850-pound polar bear travel from New York to Missouri? The same way any special delivery might: via FedEx.

Caitlyn trained Kali in the weeks before his departure, to calmly walk into a huge aluminum crate, a move he performed on his departure day. Kali's crate was loaded into a truck, which drove him to Rochester, New York, where his crate was transferred to a plane to Memphis, Tennessee. Kali had already been on quite a few flights, but flying a tiny cub is quite different from flying a large, sub-adult polar bear! FedEx donated their expertise and services for Kali's trip. A veterinarian and zoo officials flew with Kali, caring for him to keep him calm and comfortable.

In Memphis, Kali was loaded onto another truck. During the 4-hour drive to St. Louis, he was monitored by advanced technology, with frequent checks by a veterinarian, curator and zookeepers. The temperature was kept at a polar-bear-friendly 55 degrees and frequent stops were made to check on his comfort.

It was a lovely May evening when his truck pulled up to the Saint Louis Zoo. After a long journey, Kali finally made it to his new home.

The kids looked from Julie to Kali in wonder, marveling at the long journey the bear took to get to St. Louis. After all that, here he was, swimming right in front of them.

"That's his story," Julie told the crowd. "That's how Kali got here."

"But if Kali's from Alaska," one boy asked, "how can he live in St. Louis? It's so hot here in the summertime!"

"Well," Julie started, "he has access to an air-conditioned building, but honestly he usually chooses to be outside, no matter how hot it is. He has two saltwater pools to cool off in, but he just doesn't feel heat in the same way that we do. Polar bears are so well-insulated with their thick coats and fat layers that their core temperature is stabilized, like a thermos that keeps things both hot and cool."

"Don't you think he misses Luna, though?" another child asked.

"Polar bears are actually solitary animals," Julie answered. "The only times polar bears are with other bears are when a mother has cubs, several bears are feeding in one spot, or there's a mating relationship but even that would only last 2-3 weeks. So, Kali is housed as he would live in the wild as a young, adult male polar bear."

The kids nodded.

"All right," Julie said, "let's give this bear some food."

Much to the crowd, and Kali's, delight, she rolled meatballs, carrots, fish and chow down a chute into the pool, with a little bit of lard for dessert!

She then stood back and watched as the big bear floated in the water, crunching on his carrots and slurping down fish. Little eyes and faces pressed against the glass and stared up at him in wonder. Watching these kids interact with Kali never ceased to amaze Julie. Separated by only a pane of glass, they were nose to nose with a real polar bear!

"I love Kali," she heard a little boy say to his mother. Julie smiled.

She knew that every day Kali spent simply playing in his pool, he was inspiring the next generation to fall in love with polar bears.

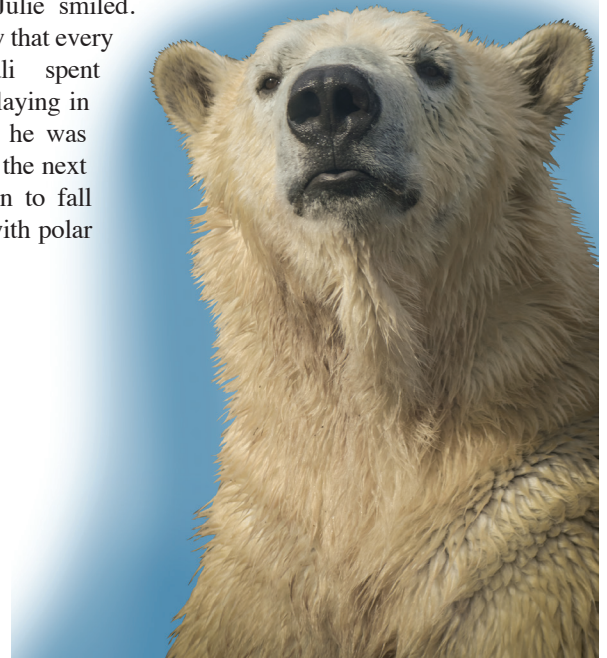


Photo Credit: Saint Louis Zoo