

From Russian News:

The only long-beaked echidna in Europe dies at the Moscow Zoo. The male animal named Smol was 18 years old; he was brought to Moscow from New Guinea in 1997 when he was about two years of age. The zoo employees disclosed that Smol had died of a chronic disease. Visitors to the Moscow Zoo never got to see that rare faunal form - Smol would get rattled when he saw people, and for that reason he was never exhibited. And yet he was remembered at the zoo as a genial and grateful critter - Smol recognized his keepers by their footfall: if he heard the steps of a person who took care of him he would immediately come to the door, but if it was some stranger he would continue to do his thing. On command, Smol would step on the scales, which proved to be a very valuable skill because he was a very strong and spry animal. Smol lived in a separate room that contained a bathtub - he really liked to bathe. Sometimes they would put maggots on the tubs bottom and he enjoyed hunting them. He could hold his breath for up to five minutes. His favorite dish was the "miner" rain-worm; he refused to eat any other worms. As an alternative, he might eat meat cut in the shape of worms. They could never find a mate for Smol. This was the only Bruijn's echidna kept in captivity in Europe.

Linor Goralik:

Smol the long-beaked echidna, with whom I had been friends for many a year, died two days ago at the Moscow Zoo. Smol was a wonderful and yet strange creature. He behaved with people whom he didn't fear totally as if he were a dog: he would go to them, push himself under their hand for them to stroke him better and answer to a voice. But when he saw strangers he was running to hide behind the radiator. Only his head would fit behind the radiator, and his big bobtailed rear end would stick outside. Ten to fifteen minutes later Smol would recover and start believing that they were his friends; he would get from behind the radiator and go push himself under their hand. In spite of our long acquaintanceship, I had never managed to convince myself that this was a representative of the terrestrial fauna. I was all the time under the impression that creatures like this on his planet are a kind of local "dogs". And there are also local, shall we say, "cows". Well, that would explain it. You stroke the critter - and he has a mixture of fur and needles. And, for some reason, the tiniest and sharpest needles are over his ears.

The story of Smol's life at the Moscow Zoo somehow really corroborates this extraterrestrial scenario: he was living alone, didn't see anyone, and his closest relatives were located 15,000 kilometers away. They had never managed to find a mate for him: long-beaked echidnas are delicate, they can't bear transportations, they can't bear stress, basically, they can't bear anything at all, and there don't seem to be any female representatives of his species in Europe at all. But, presumably, he was supposed to live until he was fifty years old. But he died at 16. He had a favorite tattered sneaker, with which he played, a rather big company of bats who shared his room with him and the zoo man Aleksey who took care of him and who, I think, treated him with great affection. I am terribly sorry about Smol: he was very warm and very smart. And if the alien life forms, when they are eventually discovered, turn out to be like him - we could all consider ourselves to be dashed lucky.