

# Lioness Neela dies of COVID-19 at Vandalur zoo

Nine of the big cats have tested positive for the infection

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A 9-year-old lioness, Neela, succumbed to COVID-19 at the Arignar Anna Zoological Park in Vandalur on Thursday. Nine lions in the zoo have tested positive for the infection.

According to a release from the Environment and Forests Department, a COVID-19 outbreak was reported among Asiatic lions at the zoo. A few of the animals were found symptomatic and one of them, Neela, succumbed to the disease.

Initially, five lions reported anorexia (loss of appetite) and occasional coughing. The in-house veterinary team and later TANUVAS experts provided treatment. Nasal and rectal swabs and faecal samples of 11 lions were sent to the National Institute of High Security Diseases (NIHSAD) in Bhopal.



The government closed the zoo to visitors on April 20 in view of COVID-19. ■ FILE PHOTO

While the dead lioness was asymptomatic and showed some nasal discharge only a day ago, nine of the 11 lions, whose samples were sent, tested positive for SARS CoV-2. To ascertain whether the reported findings are false positives or the animal could have died of co-morbidities, samples were also sent to the Indian Veterinary Re-

search Institute, Bareilly, and the Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology, Hyderabad, on June 4, the zoo administration said.

As similar outbreaks were reported in the Hyderabad and Jaipur zoos, officials immediately quarantined all the Asiatic lions and started treating them with antibiotics and other prophylactic drugs, in consultation with the TANUVAS' expert team and veterinarians at the Hyderabad and Bronx zoos.

AAZP officials have been instructed to get RT-PCR tests done for all animal handlers and concerned staff. The government had closed all zoos to visitors on April 20 and so far, 61% handlers of the big cats have been vaccinated. PPE kits, too, have been made mandatory for animal keepers, veterinary doctors and field staff visiting the lion safari area.