Winter Warmers

- Photography and Text by Diane McAllister/naturepl.com –
At the Korakukan Onsen, a leisurely resort for humans with an outdoor natural hot spring, native Japanese macaques are determined to share the benefits of the warm water. But it’s not working out so well. The macaques snatch personal belongings, steal food and frighten the guests. It’s not very relaxing and isn’t the most sanitary situation. Only one solution will make everyone happy - build the “snow monkeys”, as they are affectionately called, their own spa. The spa was constructed further up the mountain, complete with waterfalls, a soaking pool and resting ledges. It had daily offerings of barley and soybeans. Upon completion, the rangers arrived with their offerings of food and the little creatures went for it. They settled in, knowing they could find both food and warmth in a safe haven. It became paradise for more than 200 macaques that call this place home. Fast forward fifty years: tourists, school children, photographers and animal lovers from all over the world make the trek to Jigokudani Yaen-koen Monkey Park to observe the monkeys in their spa habitat. It is the only place in the world to see wild snow monkeys so easily. This steamy, bubbling volcanic environment is covered with snow for 4 months of the year, with temperatures as low as -20° Celsius. The sub-arctic forest can be daunting, with steep cliffs and thick ice. No other non-human primate lives in a colder or more northerly climate. Those humans who make this trek find themselves a front row seat in a snow monkey theatre. Watching the entertaining macaques go through their day-to-day happenings is truly a gift from Mother Nature herself.

I am one of those photographers to make such a pilgrimage. I especially enjoy capturing social interactions, intimate moments and amusing antics within wildlife families. What could be cuter than little monkeys - especially ones that make snowballs? After completing a thirteen-hour flight from the United States to Narita Japan, followed by a four-hour van ride to the base of the Monkey Park, I must now hike up the mountain to join the snow monkeys. The winding trail is incredibly beautiful. Snow is falling quietly, the pine fragrance is intoxicating. Sika deer and Japanese serow (a goat- or antelope-like mammal) reside here too. Some folks use walking sticks. I wear steel crampons to avoid falling on the icy trail. An hour passes. Suddenly, I see my first snow monkey on the trail ahead. It is chewing on a stick. I cannot believe the small size, barely 2 feet tall. “Hey little fella” I say, but it is oblivious to me. Macaques are normally 2-4 feet tall and weigh 22-66 pounds, the males being larger than females. Their thick coats range in colours of grey, brown and cream. The mottled coat of this little macaque is immaculate. However, it is the eyes of this pink-faced creature that fascinate me. They are so human-like, large, expressive and engaging. I had been forewarned not to gaze directly into those eyes for too long, nor smile too broadly displaying my teeth. This is taken as a threat to the monkey and they have been known to scratch and bite in defense.

I hurry to the ryokan (a traditional Japanese inn and my home for the next five days). The almost 150 year old building is rustic but charming, with numerous rooftops covered with mounds of snow and outlined by 5-foot icicles. Dinner consists of delicious local vegetables, chicken, fruit, soup and river fish. The fried crickets take some getting used to; a sip of sake is welcome. Indoor natural spring baths await on the lower level but the original outdoor onsen is also there, providing a fresh air alternative for relieving muscle tension and promoting inner well-being right before bedtime. But be prepared if taking a dip during daylight hours, an occasional monkey or two may join you!
During the night I hear loud crashes of snow from the rooftops. It is difficult to sleep, I am anxious to see the snow monkeys and wish morning would come quickly. I gaze outside at the non-stop, heavy snowfall. I have been praying for snow and it is everywhere, piled high over trees and boulders. Then I see it, something unexpected is close to the eaves not 10 feet away. A Snow Monkey is peering back at me. I watch it for a minute through the snowflakes until it disappears.

The entrance to the Monkey Park is about a 15-minute walk uphill. The fee to enter is 500 yen, small change for monkey bliss. A building serves as a warming hut and souvenir shop. Portraits of past alpha male monkeys hang on the wall. The outdoor thermometer reminds me it is -5°Celsius, but I take off my thick gloves as I normally do on a shoot. Among the first visitors in, I position myself near the trails the monkeys take to the hot springs. Crouching down, I get ready to photograph. Yes! Here they come, over streams, rocks and piles of snow! Babies clinging beneath their trotting mothers; juveniles riding atop their mothers’ backs, bobbing above the snowdrifts. Young adults and grey elders travel single file to join in the feed going on near the monkey spa.

At the spa it is monkey heaven on earth! Some Snow Monkeys are jumping into the hot spring, while others search the snow for barley, which the warden has thrown about. You would think some macaques had not seen each other in years, such a reunion! There is so much going on, I take this newness all in, then narrow in on a lone female. She is sitting upright, rocking back and forth near a steamy area of boulders. A tiny pink face emerges briefly from her chest to check me out and then settles back in again to nurse. The mother is rocking her baby to sleep.

The juveniles are quite comical, and extremely adorable with their enormous bonnets of fur. They utter soft coos one second, then scream the next, as they squabble and tag at one another’s ears, noses and tails. A pointed look from their mother soon puts a stop to all that. They roll snowballs instead, standing upright, and even holding hands. For a moment they are still and blink slowly to show off their long eyelashes for me. I note their eye color ranges from bluish-green to golden-brown. But then they are up and running again, climbing onto everything; including pipes, ropes, and handrails, even the web cam. Their expressions are priceless; they are actually smiling, pouting and frowning. One curious chap even ducked under my rain poncho momentarily. We both looked at each other, equally surprised.

By observing all day and every day (and being patient), I learned a lot during my short stay with the snow monkeys. This is a photogapher’s dream to be able to get up close and personal with their subject. Images of snow-laden heads in the steamy spa, daily grooming rituals in action, trance-like daydreaming elders, sweet but sneaky juveniles, and peaceful sleep moments were all offered to me. But sometimes I just wanted to observe and not photograph. Macaques are like humans in many ways. I realise they too feel happiness, love, sadness and pain. I feel fortunate to have known these creatures intimately. Each face is recognizable to me. Each behavior is less bewildering. The people of Japan love the har- dy resident souls of the Jigokudani Park snow monkeys. Now I do too. The Park is closing for the day and darkness begins to fall. I say goodbye and start my last trek back to the ryokan. Upon nearing it, I see a few monkeys have gathered in the outdoor onsen. The onsen for “humans”. I think to myself, this may be my only chance to soak in a thermal pool with a primate.
Jigokudani Monkey Park is open year-round. The name Jigokudani, meaning “Hell’s Valley”, is due to the steam and boiling water that bubbles out of small crevices in the frozen ground, surrounded by steep cliffs and formidably cold and hostile forests. The heavy snowfalls, an elevation of 850 metres and limited accessibility via a narrow footpath keep it uncrowded, despite the fact that it is well-known.
Ice forms easily in the -4°C cold. The warmth of the hot springs is a blessing and the monkeys totally submerge their bodies.

The monkeys often fall asleep in the warmth of the natural hot springs. This one seems to not have a care in the world.
“Snow monkeys in heavy snowfall are a challenge to photograph”, says McAllister. “Using fill-flash had the drawback of over-emphasizing the falling snowflakes and many times I had to wait for the wind to clear the steam from the hot springs before I could shoot anything”. 
“Snow monkeys are excellent swimmers”, says McAllister. “When the rangers arrive with their handouts of barley, bathing macaques race across the water for their share [left]. I have even witnessed juveniles fighting underwater!” [above]
“I didn’t spend all my time in the spa area, as many tourists seem content to do,” says McAllister. “I went off trail, away from the crowds. It was exciting to explore the rapids where monkeys leapt between rocks covered with what looked like enormous scoops of ice cream!”
Snow Monkeys have a long history in the arts. They are portrayed in religion, folklore, paintings, the zodiac, and fairy tales. The “three wise monkeys” forewarning people to “see no evil, hear no evil and speak no evil” is carved in relief over the entrance to the Togosho Shrine in Nikko, Japan.
Typically, 20% of a macaque’s winter day is spent being inactive. The rest is distributed between traveling, feeding and social grooming.
Snow monkeys have opposable thumbs. They possess a larger brain than other monkeys and are highly intelligent. Their dexterity is similar to humans, with sophisticated hand to eye coordination.

Snow monkeys are omnivores. In warmer weather they consume insects, fungi, invertebrates and bird eggs. They stock up on fruits and nuts to fatten up pre-winter. Dead leaves and bark barely sustain them during winter months but thanks to the wardens at Jigokudani, they also get barley and soybeans twice daily.
In warmer summer months, the home range of a macaque is normally 1.5 miles. With less food available in the winter, levels of activity fall and their range is restricted to just 1/3 mile.
Snow monkeys travel the trails to and from the hot springs. You can position yourself nearby and watch them pass. Snow monkeys attain their red-face upon reaching adulthood. During breeding season, male and female faces turn almost scarlet.
Long, sharp canines are used for tearing and puncturing food such as nuts and the inner bark of trees. They are also used for defence. Cheek pouches store food during foraging.

A sentry sounds the alarm in the event of approaching danger. Frequent “coo’s” are issued to keep the troop together and strengthen the social relationship.
Snow monkeys are very social animals and bathing together strengthens their bonds. They live in matrilineal societies, meaning that females will stay within the original troop their entire lives. A younger female juvenile holds a higher rank than an older one. Only the highest-ranking members of the troop are allowed in the thermal pool. Others can only wait and watch from a distance.
Males within a group have a dominance hierarchy; with one male having alpha status. If it leaves the troop or dies, a new male will take over. With this competition between males it is not unusual to see them jump up unexpectedly and terrorise each other. Most of the time the outbursts are vocal and not physical, with the loudest screamer usually emerging victorious.

"Occasionally you do see males with facial scars", says McAllister. "One youngster I saw was limping about. Younger males will sometimes leave their troop, unlike the females".

Above: A pair of snow monkeys nestle closely together during a snowfall. On bitter, cold nights, many monkeys will huddle together for warmth while they sleep. Males are taller and heavier than females. There is a correlation between climate and body weight; the colder the climate in higher elevations, the larger the monkey.

Right: A protective male firmly holds onto his potential partner. But it is the female who will ultimately pick who she wants to mate with, dependent on his rank and longevity with the troop.
Female snow monkeys bear one baby at a time, gestation is 6 months. Weaning takes place in the second year. Older siblings are still dependent on their mother too, for nurturing and survival skills.

A male and female macaque will mate, feed, rest and travel together for 1 ½ days during the mating season. Both sexes will have many partners, the females averaging four different males per season. Breeding season is late fall and early winter, with peak birth periods in April –July.
Japanese macaques have one baby at a time, forming a strong mother-infant bond that lasts for a lifetime. Mothers nurse their infants for up to 18 months but will discourage suckling after 7 months. Infants consume their first solid food at five to six weeks old, and can forage independently from their mothers by seven weeks.

A mother carries her infant on her belly for its first four weeks. After this time, the mother will carry her infant on her back. Baby macaques are walking, running, climbing and jumping as early as 3-4 months of age but will still hitch a ride with their mothers up to a year of age and sometimes beyond.
After a warm soak and grooming ritual in the spa, this adorable juvenile dries off before leaving the area with its troop for a night in the forest. It may wander and forage a bit, but always knows where its mother is. “Juvenile Snow Monkeys are quite comical”, says McAllister. “They move about constantly, picking fights, squabbling with each other, rolling snowballs and climbing onto everything when mum isn’t looking”.
In some populations male infants play in larger groups than females. But female infants have more social contacts and groom more often than male infant macaques. From the second year of life, males preferentially associate with males of the same approximate age while females associate with other females of all age and sex classes as well as with infants and adult males.
“One should never look a snow monkey directly into its eyes, nor smile widely with teeth showing”, says McAllister. “It is taken as a threat to the monkey, and it may scratch or bite you. Hiding behind a camera lens seems to work quite well”.
The fur of Japanese macaques can vary from grey to yellow-brown to exclusively brown. Their fur is uniquely adapted to cold, with fur thickness increasing as habitat temperature decreases, allowing the monkeys to cope with winter temperatures as low as -20°C.
Social grooming is common among Japanese macaques. Grooming helps to remove parasites and also creates and maintains social bonds within the troop. Most grooming is performed between kin, usually mothers and daughters, but grooming among individuals who are unrelated does occur and serves to reinforce group cohesion as a whole.
There is evidence that, on average, Japanese macaques spend more time grooming than other daily activities, including feeding, travelling and resting. This demonstrates the importance of social bonding within troops.
Snow monkeys are quadrupedal, moving on all fours. They will stand upright occasionally, generally if they are holding something in their hands or to get a better vantage point.