



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **Birmingham Zoo Announces Gopher Tortoise Head Start Program**

**BIRMINGHAM, AL** –The Birmingham Zoo is thrilled to announce the Gopher Tortoise Head Start Program in partnership with the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (ADCNR).

The Gopher Tortoise Head Start Program began when the Birmingham Zoo accepted 29 gopher tortoise hatchlings from the Wildlife & Freshwater Division (AWFF) of ADCNR in November of 2021. This program is a type of wildlife reintroduction strategy in which young animals born in the wild are brought into human care before being released back into their natural habitat. In the case of gopher tortoises, research has shown a strong correlation between survival and hatchling size.

“Gopher tortoises are a key species in the longleaf pine ecosystem and we are thrilled to be a part of this program,” says Birmingham Zoo Director of Animal Health Dr. Stephanie McCain. “As a conservation-focused organization in such an ecologically diverse state, it is important that we play a role in local conservation efforts.”

The gopher tortoise is native to the southeastern United States and inhabits the longleaf pine ecosystem found in the southern part of Alabama. It is considered a keystone species because more than 350 different mammals, reptiles, amphibians, insects, and even birds depend on gopher tortoise burrows for their survival. In Alabama, the gopher tortoise is a state-protected species of “High Conservation Concern” and is also federally listed as threatened in the western portion of its natural habitat range.

The Gopher Tortoise Head Start Program is an exciting opportunity for the Birmingham Zoo to work with conservation partners and participate in the hands-on effort to conserve a significant keystone species found only in the southeastern United States.

**Zoo Logo and Photos of Gopher Tortoise Hatchlings**



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## **ABOUT THE BIRMINGHAM ZOO**

The Birmingham Zoo is an independent, not-for-profit, 501(c)(3) organization and is accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA).

## **OUR MISSION** *Inspiring Passion to Conserve the Natural World*

Approximately 550 animals of 180 species call the Birmingham Zoo home, including sea lions, zebras, elephants, bongos, and endangered species from six continents. The Birmingham Zoo is the only AZA-accredited zoo in the state of Alabama.

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