



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Birmingham Zoo Announces the Successful Release of Imperiled Gopher Tortoises

An important conservation achievement for gopher tortoises in Alabama

BIRMINGHAM, AL – The Birmingham Zoo (Zoo) proudly announces the release of 98 gopher tortoises into their natural habitat in Alabama. In cooperation with the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (ADCNR), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Eckerd College, 98 tortoises between one and two years of age were released last month on state lands in Covington County, Alabama.

The Birmingham Zoo joined the Gopher Tortoise Head Start Program in 2021 when the Zoo accepted 29 gopher tortoise hatchlings from the Wildlife & Freshwater Division (WFF) of ADCNR and Eckerd College. This program is a type of wildlife reintroduction strategy in which eggs from the wild are taken into human care, hatched and the young cared for to ensure optimal health and growth 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 360 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.

In an effort to improve the densities of the tortoise population which have been shown to be an important part of creating a viable population, these ‘headstart’ tortoises were released in concentrated areas in an effort to increase population

viability. Working closely with ADCNR's non-game biologist, Ericha Nix, who is the Gopher Tortoise Program lead, and Dr. Jeff Goessling of Eckerd College, gopher tortoise eggs were collected across a two-year span from 17 nests in areas with either marginal habitat or extremely low population density. Dr. Goessling and his team incubated the eggs at his lab across both years and then raised or "head-started" 69 tortoises across two years while the Birmingham Zoo cared for 29 tortoises for about a year.

Young gopher tortoises are at high risk of predation at young ages. By starting a tortoise under human care, these tortoises grew at a healthy but faster rate than their wild counterparts. Although these tortoises were only one to two years old at the time of release, they were the equivalent size of an 8 to 10-year-old animal in the wild, thereby given an impressive "head start" and will likely increase their ability to avoid predation and survive in the wild.

"It has been such a gift to work on this conservation project not only for myself but also for our team of Animal Health Care, Reptile and Relief staff that spent many hours over the last year caring for these young tortoises," said Terra Manasco, Birmingham Zoo's Conservation Manager. "Being able to participate in releasing them back into their natural habitat was a defining moment in our careers as biologists and animal care professionals."

Monitoring of the young tortoises released will continue for the foreseeable future and includes radio transmitters affixed to 30 of the head-started tortoises.

The Gopher Tortoise Head Start Program has been 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 Tortoises





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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 500 animals of 175 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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