Endangered Oregon spotted frogs released into wild

Final release for collaborative program

SEATTLE—Nearly 750 Oregon spotted frogs reared at Woodland Park Zoo were released yesterday into marshy wetlands at a protected site in Pierce County.

The frogs were collected from wetlands as eggs and placed at the zoo for hatching and rearing for approximately seven months in a predator-free home as they transformed from tadpoles to juveniles, increasing their survival by giving them a head start until they were large enough to avoid most predators.

Head starting and releasing the frogs is part of a cooperative program with Woodland Park Zoo, Northwest Trek Wildlife Park, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, the Sustainability in Prisons Project, and other zoos and state and federal agencies.

Washington declared the Oregon spotted frog an endangered species in 1997, and on August 28, 2014, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service listed the frog as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act. It historically ranged from southwestern British Columbia to northeastern California. However, scientists have seen populations plummet, driving the frog toward extinction. The native amphibian has lost ground to habitat loss from draining and development, disease and the introduction of invasive species such as the American bullfrog and reed canary grass.

Head starting the Oregon spotted frogs began in 2008. "Woodland Park Zoo has released more than 4,200 frogs since we joined the effort in 2009," said Jennifer Pramuk, PhD, an animal curator and reptile and amphibian expert at Woodland Park Zoo. "We also have increased survivorship of the tadpoles and frogs at the zoo nearly every year beginning with a 35% survivorship rate in 2009 to over 90% survivorship this year. In total more than 7,000 frogs have been released by all stakeholders combined. The institutions involved should be very proud of the progress we've made toward helping to save this species."

Yesterday marks the last release of the Oregon spotted frog head start program for the time being. "The Oregon spotted frog in 2014 was federally listed as 'threatened' under the Endangered Species Act," explained Fred Koontz, PhD, vice president of Field Conservation at Woodland Park Zoo. "The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service is working with Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife and other stakeholders to implement recovery efforts. Frogs will not be released next year, in order to focus on habitat enhancements and monitoring the success of the last seven years of reintroductions and conservation actions."

"This project has gained a lot of ground over the past seven years," said Pramuk. "That success has allowed us to transition our focus from rearing healthy frogs in institutions and releasing them, to helping them reestablish their population in the wild. The project's level of success was possible because of the vision and persistence of our entire team. It is very rewarding to know our hard work has paid off, but also bittersweet for many of us who will miss working with this beautiful and unique frog."

Oregon Spotted Frog (Rana pretiosa)
- Biologists estimate the Oregon spotted frog has disappeared from up to 90% of its former range. The current range of the Oregon spotted frog stretches from southwestern British
Columbia, Canada, south through the Puget Sound/Willamette Valley trough and southern Cascade mountains, with its southernmost point in Oregon’s Klamath Basin.

- Oregon spotted frogs are highly aquatic. They are found in or near permanent still water, such as lakes, ponds, springs, marshes, and the grassy margins of slow-moving streams.

- The life expectancy of the species is five to eight years in the wild, though most do not live that long.

- Both juvenile and adult frogs are carnivores, feeding primarily on insects, spiders, and earthworms. At the zoo, tadpoles eat a combination of commercial fish food pellets and a keeper-prepared mixture of cooked romaine, kale and spirulina. After they transform into juvenile frogs, they are fed live crickets and other insects.

Conservation is the heart of Woodland Park Zoo’s mission. Zoos are well positioned to reach millions each year with the unique opportunity to connect with nature, learn about conservation issues around the globe, and take action to make a difference for wildlife. Woodland Park Zoo supports projects in the Pacific Northwest through its Living Northwest, including projects focused on native raptors, turtles, butterflies, frogs and carnivores, and the shrub-steppe, wetlands and forest habitats they depend on to survive. For more information on Woodland Park Zoo’s Living Northwest conservation program, visit zoo.org/conservation.

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