

PRESS RELEASE

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Editor note: For new photos and video of an introduction session, visit the zoo's blog at <http://blog.zoo.org/2016/04/baby-yola-confident-as-she-learns.html>

Bond between mom and baby gorilla continues to grow Next steps: adult male gorilla to be introduced to the baby gorilla

SEATTLE—Last November, Woodland Park Zoo staff stepped in and assumed 24/7 care of a baby female gorilla immediately after her mom gave birth but didn't show strong maternal skills. Five months later, a bond is steadily growing between the mom, Nadiri, and her baby, Yola.



At 5 months old, Yola has made great strides in mobility, energy and independence. "As Yola gains more physical strength, self-confidence, and independence, her mom's interest in her is growing and daily introduction sessions are more interactive and dynamic," said Martin Ramirez, mammal curator at Woodland Park Zoo. "Establishing a bond has been a slow, methodical process, but Nadiri and Yola clearly enjoy each other's company and anticipate their time together."

The baby [western lowland gorilla](#) has been receiving round-the-clock care by gorilla and veterinary staff behind the scenes in the sleeping dens of the gorilla exhibit, where Nadiri and Yola can see each other throughout the day and have one-on-one "getting to know you" sessions. "For the long-term benefits and welfare of Yola, it's critical for her to know she's a gorilla and not a human. Not only is Yola exposed to her mom, but she also sees, hears and smells the other gorillas, a requisite for learning the complex social cues of gorillas. She is never far from the gorilla den," said Ramirez.

When Nadiri is not with her baby, she lives with two other gorillas: a 38-year-old male, Leonel (aka Leo), and a 14-year-old female, Akenji. Establishing a bond between Nadiri and Yola is an integral part of the process toward integrating Yola into her group. Since the introduction sessions between mom and baby have been consistently positive and they're comfortable with each other, staff are taking the next step toward socializing Yola with her group.

Starting within the next several days, Leo will be added to the mix of introduction sessions. "Leo has been able to see Yola every day since she was born and has consistently shown interest in her. He watches her and content grunts, which is a form of positive gorilla vocalization," said Ramirez. Initial introductions with Leo will be short sessions and increase incrementally as long as the interactions between all three gorillas remain positive. "We're confident that Leo will exert his role as a silverback (adult male gorilla) by watching over Yola and playing peacemaker. He should be a positive presence for both Nadiri and Yola."

The zoo hopes to put Yola in the public gorilla exhibit sometime in June. "As we do with all of our animals, we follow their cues and pay close attention to their dynamics and interactions. Our goal is to ensure a smooth transition for Yola into her gorilla family. It's important we don't rush the process, but we're aiming for June to have her going out into the public gorilla exhibit with her family," added Ramirez.

Yola is a typical gorilla at her age. She climbs and grasps with her hands and feet, and is now strong enough that her human caretakers no longer have to hold her; she, in fact, holds onto them. "A baby gorilla at this age hangs onto its mom's arm or back. This is natural behavior, which also helps build and maintain muscles," said Ramirez.

Introduction sessions have been expanded from a single den to multiple dens, allowing Nadiri to shift location by choice and for Yola to follow her, which she now does by knuckle walking, another physical milestone for Yola. Nadiri pays attention to Yola's vocalizations, including

crying; she comforts her baby with content grunts, gives reassuring pats on her head or covers her with a burlap blanket.

At 20 years old, Nadiri is a first-time, inexperienced mom who gave birth naturally but didn't pick up her baby like a mother gorilla would. Because she lacked experience with motherhood, the zoo had prepared for different outcomes while she was pregnant, including human intervention.

Yola's father is 36-year-old Vip, who has sired six other offspring with three different females at the zoo. He currently lives at the zoo in another group with two females.

Nadiri and Yola carry very valuable genes for the Gorilla Species Survival Plan (SSP), a North American cooperative breeding program to help ensure a healthy, self-sustaining population of gorillas for the next 100 years. Woodland Park Zoo participates in 95 SSPs, overseen by the Association of Zoos & Aquariums.

The other gorillas currently living at Woodland Park Zoo are: females Amanda, 46; Jumoke, 30; Akenji, 14; Uzumma, 8; and male Pete, 48.

The western lowland gorilla lives in seven countries across west equatorial Africa: southeast Nigeria, Gabon, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Congo, Angola and Equatorial Guinea. All gorillas are endangered; the western lowland gorilla is critically endangered. The estimated population of western lowland gorillas in the wild is about 95,000. There are three primary reasons gorillas are endangered. One is habitat destruction caused by logging, mining, and slash and burn agriculture. The bushmeat trade, facilitated by logging, has become an immediate threat to the western lowland gorilla population, particularly in Cameroon. Additionally, infectious diseases such as the Ebola virus have recently become a great threat, killing many gorillas.

Woodland Park Zoo supports conservation efforts for the critically endangered western lowland gorilla through the [Mbeli Bai Study](#). The study researches the social organization and behaviors of more than 450 lowland gorillas living in the southwest of Nouabale-Ndoki National Park, Republic of Congo. The data collected enables scientists to assess the vulnerability of populations to habitat threats and predict their ability to recover from decline.

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