

PRESS RELEASE

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Editor note: Visit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aGkT2hwz9SU&feature=youtu.be> to see a video of baby gorilla Yola's first year.

Baby gorilla Yola turns 1 today!

SEATTLE—A year ago, a female western lowland gorilla was born at Woodland Park Zoo and captured the hearts and minds of the community. Today, Yola turns 1 year old and is confident, content and a valuable member of her family.



Yola lives with her mom, 20-year-old Nadiri, 38-year-old male Leonel (aka Leo) and 15-year-old female Akenji. Gorilla fans can see Yola and her family in the outdoor exhibit 12:30 to 4:00 p.m. daily.

Nadiri, a first-time, inexperienced mom, gave birth to Yola naturally but because she didn't pick up her baby like a mother gorilla would, the zoo's gorilla and veterinary staff had to step in immediately to provide 24/7 care. Throughout Nadiri's pregnancy, the zoo had prepared for different outcomes including human intervention.

For the first five months of her life, Yola remained under human care behind the scenes in the sleeping dens of the gorilla exhibit while having multiple daily visits with Nadiri to help nurture their bond. Not once was she removed from the dens. "Research and experience over the last two decades have shown us it's critical for a baby gorilla to be immersed in the world of gorillas starting from day one. Exposing Yola to her mom and other gorillas round the clock allowed her to learn the complex social cues of gorillas," said Martin Ramirez, mammal curator at Woodland Park Zoo. "By seeing, hearing and smelling the other gorillas, it was important for Yola to grow up knowing she's a gorilla and not a human. She responds appropriately to gorilla body language and subtle vocalizations."

Yola's father is 37-year-old Vip, who has sired six other offspring with three different females at the zoo. He lives at the zoo in another group with females Jumoke, 31, and Uzumma, 9. Two other gorillas currently at Woodland Park Zoo are female Amanda, 46, and male Pete, 48.

Staff dedicated many hours and sleepless nights taking care of Yola with a focus on establishing a bond between mom and baby, followed by socializing her with the other members in her group. When Yola was 6 months old, staff discontinued overnight care because Nadiri began sleeping with Yola through the night. "We could not have wished for a better outcome," said Ramirez. "Nadiri's maternal instincts kicked in and she has turned out to be a wonderful, attentive mom. They are fully bonded as mother and daughter and this will have long-term social benefits not only for mother and daughter, but also for the other members in her group," noted Ramirez.

For Leo and Akenji, the addition of Yola has enhanced the social well-being of their group. "Yola has enriched the lives of Nadiri, Leo and Akenji. Babies have a way of doing that," said Nancy Hawkes, PhD, Woodland Park Zoo's general curator. "As social animals, gorillas benefit from each other's company, much like human families. They provide companionship for one another, establish bonds, create security and teach one another how to be a gorilla."

Leo was handraised for the first four years of his life at a Texas zoo where he was born. He didn't learn gorilla etiquette from his own species nor was he successfully socialized at two other zoos where he lived before coming to Woodland Park Zoo in 2008, said Hawkes. Today, thanks to the expertise and diligence of the zoo's gorilla keeper staff, Leo plays a leadership role and peacemaker in his group, as a silverback (adult male gorilla) should. Leo,

who didn't have the experience of being around infant gorillas, showed a sincere, consistent interest in Yola since her birth and immediately took to her. "You could say that Yola has brought out the inner silverback in Leo. It's so rewarding to see these four gorillas as a solid, socially healthy group," added Hawkes.

At a year old, Yola currently weighs 21 pounds and continues to receive supplemental formula three times a day; she should be weaned when she's about 2 years old. Her diet also consists of solid foods—essentially the same food her mom eats—such as fruits, veggies, leaf eater biscuits and browse (cut branches from trees and plants).

Ramirez reports that Yola has achieved important milestones appropriate for a gorilla her age. "Yola is healthy and a well-adjusted baby gorilla. She's adventurous and a confident walker and climber," added Ramirez. "While Yola was a little fearful of Akenji, who at 15 years old is like a teenager with a rambunctious personality, she is becoming more comfortable around Akenji as she becomes more mobile. We expect them to turn the corner and become play buddies real soon."

For Yola's birthday, the zoo invites the community to leave a note on [Facebook](#), which will be added to a birthday card for Yola's caretakers: Share a warm wish, a photo, a memory, a reason you love her, or a promise you'll make to protect endangered gorillas.

"A million of our zoo guests and the broader community have made a connection with this precious baby gorilla who has become a symbol of hope for gorillas in the wild. We strongly believe Yola and the other gorillas in our care can inspire people to learn about gorillas and act on behalf of the species to ensure they remain on our planet into the future," said Woodland Park Zoo President and CEO Alejandro Grajal, PhD.

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.

For more information or to become a zoo member, visit [www.zoo.org](#) or call 206.548.2500.

Accredited by the Association of Zoos & Aquariums, award-winning Woodland Park Zoo is famed for pioneering naturalistic exhibits and setting international standards for zoos in animal care, conservation and education programs. Woodland Park Zoo is helping to save animals and their habitats in the Pacific Northwest and around the world. By inspiring people to care and act, Woodland Park Zoo is making a difference in our planet's future. For more information, visit [www.zoo.org](#)

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