

PRESS RELEASE

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Zoo's oldest gorilla recovering from dental procedure

SEATTLE—Pete, a 49-year-old, male gorilla is recovering from a dental procedure performed today at Woodland Park Zoo's Animal Health Complex. A team of eight human dental and medical specialists volunteered their time and expertise to work alongside the zoo's animal health team and help the 385-pound western lowland gorilla.

Pete is one of the oldest male gorillas in North America and the great-grandfather of the zoo's newest gorilla, 1-year-old Yola.

The elderly gorilla was anesthetized for the procedure and is resting in the off-view sleeping dens. Pete is anticipated to be back in the public outdoor enclosure on Sunday or later during the week.

While Pete is expected to fully recover, there are added risks and potential complications due to his advanced age. According to Dr. Darin Collins, Woodland Park Zoo's director of animal health, a 49-year-old gorilla is well into advanced geriatric age. "Essentially, it is nearly double in human years. We will keep Pete under close observation to ensure his well-being, especially because of his age," said Collins.

The procedure was done to investigate a potentially infected tooth or other related issues. "We identified multiple areas of infection associated with his teeth, and one infected tooth was successfully extracted," said Collins. He added that at any one time, Pete had up to four dental surgeons working on his mouth. "It was amazing to watch the surgeons work on Pete. Because of Pete's advanced age, anesthesia is a high risk for this patient. Given his past history with an infected tooth, a swollen face and gradual weight decline, an examination was the best option for diagnosis and treatment."

Pete had been on a prescribed program of antibiotics and analgesics while under close observation. "No other life-threatening problems were found with Pete. We really hope that correcting his mouth problems resolves his weight loss," said Collins.

The zoo has a formal process to evaluate quality of life daily, sometimes multiple times daily, over the course of weeks or months once there is a concern for an individual's well-being.

The median life expectancy for male western lowland gorillas in zoos is 32 years old, although they can live in to their 40s and 50s because of the evolving field of zoo medicine—improved husbandry and management techniques, excellent animal care, better nutrition, increased medical knowledge, and diagnostic and therapeutic techniques.

"We'd like to extend our heartfelt thanks to the medical team who took time out of their busy schedules to volunteer their expertise for our gorilla. Our top-notch animal health program is due in large part to the many human and animal specialists who generously donate their time to the zoo," said Collins.

The human dental and medical team consisted of: endodontist Dr. Edmund Kwan, Kwan Endodontics; dentist/oral surgeon Dr. Roger Chin; Neal D. Futran, M.D., D.M.D., Otolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery Center at UW Medical Center; and veterinary dentist and oral surgeon G.G. Comet Riggs, DVM, Seattle Veterinary Specialists; radiologist Dr. Robert M. Liddell, Center for Diagnostic Imaging; and Greg Davis, M.D., M.P.H., University of Washington associate professor of Otolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery and Director of Rhinology and Endoscopic Skull Base Surgery.



“Because of expanded life expectancies in many animals, including great apes, animals experience the aches and pains of getting older, just like aging humans,” said Martin Ramirez, Woodland Park Zoo’s curator of mammals. “Pete has mobility issues so he’s more sedentary than he used to be, which is natural for his age. His advanced age is a strong testimony to the dedication, expertise, and passion of the zoo’s animal care and animal health staff.”

Pete has lived at Woodland Park Zoo since 1969. He and Nina were the foundation of the zoo’s gorilla program and were lifetime residents and companions; the pair produced four offspring together, which have played an important role in producing future generations for the conservation breeding program for gorillas in North American zoos. Pete, who also sired a fifth offspring with another female, has 19 grandchildren, seven great-grandchildren, including the zoo’s newest baby gorilla, 1-year-old Yola, and one great-great-grandchild. Nina passed away in 2015 due to age-related health issues.

“Pete is known by his keepers as the ‘gentleman of gorillas.’ Because of his gentleness and stature of being an excellent father and grandfather, our staff, volunteers, members and guests have had a lasting emotional connection with this special gorilla. While we’re cautiously optimistic Pete will fully recover over the next several days and can be back in the exhibit quickly, we’re planning for other potential outcomes,” said Ramirez.

Pete currently lives with 47-year-old female Amanda, who has lived at Woodland Park Zoo since 1994. After Nina’s passing, Amanda was moved from her group to live with Pete so he wouldn’t be alone.

Two other separate gorilla groups are currently in Woodland Park Zoo’s care: 21-year-old female Nadiri, 39-year-old male Leonel, 15-year-old female Akenji and 1-year-old female Yola; and 38-year-old male Vip, 31-year-old female Jumoke and 9-year-old female Uzumma.

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 100,000. There are four primary reasons gorillas are endangered. One is habitat destruction caused by logging, mining, and slash and burn agriculture. Poaching for 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; and climate change is causing the drying of the region, creating negative impacts on forest ecology and species.

Woodland Park Zoo supports conservation efforts for the western lowland gorilla through the [Mbeli Bai Gorilla Study](#). To help support this important project, drop off used handheld electronics (cell phones, MP3 players, handheld games, e-readers, digital still and video cameras, laptops, GPS, portable hard drives, etc.) at the zoo. The handheld electronics will be turned over to ECO-CELL, which operates a strict NO LANDFILL program and reimburses organizations. ECO-CELL reuses mineral ore from these devices to reduce the demand for unsustainable coltan mining in the Congo that destroys habitat for critically endangered gorillas. The zoo will direct funds from ECO-CELL toward the Mbeli Bai Gorilla Study and other African conservation projects.

Learn more about the zoo’s wildlife work in Africa and beyond at www.zoo.org/conservation.

Zoo hours: 9:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. daily through April 30. For more information or to become a zoo member, visit www.zoo.org or call 206.548.2500.

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