

PRESS RELEASE

For immediate release | June 3, 2022
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Media download link for photos:

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Buttons, partially tamed and popular elk, turns 10

SEATTLE—Buttons, the female elk who was born in eastern Washington and presumptively orphaned, who pried through backyards, belongings, and boats of people in search of food, who was the center of many photos with kids and adults, celebrates her milestone 10th birthday at Woodland Park Zoo.

Pregnant elk tend to have their calves within the same birthing window, which in this part of the country ranges from the end of May through June. So, it is likely that Buttons was born sometime within that span of time in 2012.

Buttons has experienced quite an interesting life in her 10 years. At a very young age, she became habituated to humans in the area between Ellensburg and Cle Elum and gained celebrity status as a “pet” to several neighbors. As a result, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) increasingly responded to calls about her damaging property, harassing pets and occasionally acting aggressively—hence, she notoriously became an occasional pest to others.

For the safety of Buttons and the community, WDFW made a concerted effort to relocate Buttons to a more remote area where she could live with approximately 700 other elk; however, because she was already too imprinted on humans, a successful integration with wild elk failed. Buttons ignored the herd and, instead, preferred people and moved toward human settlements where potential trouble prompted a new solution.

In spring 2019, the zoo became Buttons’ new home. “We were very lucky to find a home for Buttons at Woodland Park Zoo,” said Scott McCorquodale, WDFW Region 3 Regional Wildlife Program Manager. “After she was habituated by people, she shunned her wild relatives in favor of intimate contact with people. She’s now getting good care at the zoo and has a chance to live a normal life.”

According to the elk staff at the zoo, Buttons initially bonded with her animal keepers over her herdmates, but eventually she became accustomed to living with other elk and socializing. In addition to Buttons, the herd currently comprises Goodwyn, the sole male, and Lily and Willow. “We’re happy to report that in the last few years, Buttons has settled into a nice routine with the members of the herd,” said Kevin Murphy, an animal curator at Woodland Park Zoo.

“Buttons has a lot of personality. She’s sassy, curious, sweet and independent-minded—even a little bit bossy with some of her herdmates,” said Karen McRea, an animal keeper at Woodland Park Zoo. “Our gray wolves live in a separate habitat next to the elk where they can peer at one other. Oftentimes, we’ll see Buttons curiously watching the wolves play with their enrichment treats—seemingly unaware that in the wild, elk can be on the menu for wolves!”

Two subspecies of elk range in Washington state: Roosevelt elk, which are primarily on the west side of the Cascades, and Rocky Mountain elk, which are primarily on the east side. Buttons and Goodwyn are Rocky Mountain and Lily and Willow are Roosevelt.

Buttons is one of the lucky ones. Her story is a powerful reminder to let wild animals stay wild. That means not interacting with them in ways that make them too comfortable around people or enabling them to become reliant on humans. When that happens, it opens the door



to behaviors that can become dangerous to people and pets and can lead to the death of the animal. Taming is never a good option for the animal.

“People need to leave fawns, elk calves, otter and sea lion pups, birds and other wildlife alone if found in the wild. Oftentimes, the mother is off feeding nearby, and the animal is not orphaned,” advised Murphy. “Please honor Buttons’ 10th birthday by remembering her story and helping wild animals stay wild.”

If an infant animal is found alone, WDFW recommends contacting a licensed wildlife rehabilitation expert: <https://wdfw.wa.gov/species-habitats/living/injured-wildlife/rehabilitation/find> or PAWS Wildlife Center: <https://www.paws.org/wildlife/found-a-wild-animal/>

Woodland Park Zoo advocates for saving species and spaces around the Pacific Northwest through its [Living Northwest Program](#), including wolves, wolverines and many others. The recently reimagined Living Northwest Trail exhibit is home to the zoo’s elk herd and other native wildlife. The exhibit and its companion website, [“We Are Living Northwest.”](#) provide visitors with numerous conservation actions they can take to help the species that share the region’s iconic landscapes. Anyone can share how they are living Northwest using #IAmLivingNorthwest on social media—they may even be featured on the website!

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