

Media link for photos:

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Zoo loses Helen, its matriarch snow leopard and grandmother to cubs



SEATTLE— Woodland Park Zoo is mourning the passing of snow leopard Helen, its 20-year-old matriarch and grandmother to three cubs born exactly one year ago today and currently living at the zoo. Helen was humanely euthanized today due to declining health at her advanced age. She was diagnosed two years ago with kidney disease, which is not uncommon in geriatric animals, especially felines.

“For the past couple of years, we have been treating Helen for kidney disease, which we were able to diagnose because her caretakers successfully trained her to allow veterinary technicians to collect blood samples from her tail while receiving treats. After we determined that her kidneys were failing, we were able to follow the progression of her blood values and treat her with intermittent fluid supplementation for a long period of time, due to her great patience and the strong relationship she had with her caretakers. This disease also commonly occurs in domestic cats, and similar to pet cats with kidney disease, there isn’t always a single defining moment that makes it clear that the time has come to humanely euthanize a beloved animal. For Helen, a combination of factors including her advanced age, progression of her kidney disease, and her recent refusal to cooperate with caretakers for blood collection or treatments told us that it was time,” said veterinarian Dr. Tim Storms, director of animal health at Woodland Park Zoo. “I’m proud and thankful for the dedication and skill of her caretakers and my veterinary team for the incredible work they did to manage her illness for so long and allow Helen to live a long and enriched life.”

The median life expectancy for snow leopards in zoos is 17 to 19 years old. According to the Snow Leopard Trust, life in the wild is much harder, so the life expectancy of snow leopards in their natural habitat is more likely to be 10 to 12 years.

Helen arrived at Woodland Park Zoo in 2008 from Idaho Falls Zoo at Tautphaus Park. On her arrival, the snow leopard care team named her after the late Woodland Park Zoo staff member, Helen Freeman (1932-2007), a dedicated conservationist and the founder of the Seattle-based [Snow Leopard Trust](#), which Freeman created in 1981. Through innovative programs, effective partnerships, and the latest science, the SLT is saving these vulnerable cats and improving the lives of people who live in the snow leopard countries of Central Asia.

Under the Snow Leopard [Species Survival Plan](#), Helen had five viable offspring, all born at Woodland Park Zoo. Like her namesake, Helen Freeman, snow leopard Helen was a force of love, as demonstrated by the maternal attention, protection and

training skills she provided to all her cubs. Her last cub, Aibek (EYE-beck), was born in 2017 and is the father of three cubs born last year on Memorial Day. The cubs, male Lenny and females Phyllis and Raya (RYE-uh), are the grandchildren of Helen and can be seen in the snow leopard habitat in Australasia with mom Marai (muh-RYE); Aibek also remains at the zoo.

"Helen was a feisty snow leopard who liked to keep everyone on their toes. She loved to sit in the sun, preferably with a tasty treat. This is a sad time for Woodland Park Zoo and for our friends in the community who have watched Helen grace the zoo with her majestic beauty," said Beth Carlyle-Askew, an animal care manager at Woodland Park Zoo. "As the late Helen Freeman left behind a legacy to save snow leopards in the wild, our Helen has also left her own legacy and gave us a peek into the world of snow leopard moms successfully raising cubs and teaching instinctual skills. We're going to miss this gorgeous cat."

Woodland Park Zoo has been caring for snow leopards since the zoo's first snow leopards arrived in 1972 from the then-USSR. Under the Snow Leopard Species Survival Plan, 38 cubs have been born at the zoo and have helped diversify the genetic pool of the population in human care.

The snow leopard is a moderately large cat native to the high mountain ranges of Central Asia and Russia, including in Afghanistan, China, India, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Nepal and Pakistan. According to the Snow Leopard Trust, the population of these big cats remaining in the wild is estimated to be between 3,920 and 6,390.

To help ensure the future of snow leopards and honor Helen, the zoo asks the community to support the zoo and conservation partner Snow Leopard Trust, and pledge to never buy or sell illegal animal products on the black market.

To learn more about Woodland Park Zoo, visit www.zoo.org and follow the zoo on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [Bluesky](#) and [TikTok](#).

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