A LEGACY OF LONGEVITY

By Ron Evans, Zoo General Curator

One measure of excellent animal care and welfare is longevity. At the Louisville Zoo, older animals benefit from specialized veterinary care, habitat and diet modifications, welfare monitoring and thoughtful quality-of-life planning. From ring-tailed lemurs and gorillas to addax, tapirs and flamingos, many animals are thriving well beyond the typical lifespan of their species.

Ivan the Ring-Tailed Lemur

Ring-tailed lemurs are among the most popular species in zoos, with about 500 living in Association of Zoos and Aquariums institutions across North America. One of the most remarkable is Ivan, who lives at the Louisville Zoo.

At 35, Ivan is currently the oldest ring-tailed lemur in an AZA zoo; the oldest recorded lived to 37. In Madagascar, the average lifespan is only 15 to 20 years, making Ivan's longevity a testament to decades of attentive care and recent geriatric support.

Ivan is now retired from complex lemur social life but remains near the other lemurs and time-shares their outdoor habitat. Keepers have adapted his space with accessible platforms, soft beds and positioned brushes that help him groom. He is trained to voluntarily enter a retreat box for close veterinary checks and even has a "drama-free" plush lemur for comfort. Today, all signs indicate he remains healthy and active.

Ivan is one example of how professional care helps animals thrive into advanced age.

Through exemplary veterinary care, husbandry, nutrition and genetic management, most animals live longer in AZA-accredited zoos than they typically would in the wild.

That longevity is tied to population sustainability. AZA zoos rarely accept animals from the wild except in rescue situations, as with Louisville Zoo's grizzly bear, bald eagle, puma and female polar bear. AZA institutions cooperate on social and genetic management to support individual welfare and healthy populations.

This collaboration includes sharing veterinary and husbandry best practices through conferences, publications and animal care manuals. It also supports whole-life care, welfare monitoring and increased attention to seniors like Ivan.

Helen the Gorilla

One of the Zoo's greatest longevity examples was Helen, who lived to 64, making her the second-oldest gorilla ever recorded. Wild gorillas in West Central Africa typically live to about 35, while gorillas in zoos now commonly reach their 40s and 50s.

As animals age, care teams hold quality-of-life discussions on objective science and on compassionate decisions. Throughout her life, Helen helped millions of people connect with the wonder of gorillas.

Zoos have not accepted gorillas from the wild in more than 50 years. With continued expert care and population

management, AZA zoos are expected to maintain a genetically healthy gorilla population for 200 years without receiving another gorilla from the wild.

Ella and Roxanne the Addax

Ella and Roxanne, two female addax, are 22 and 23, well beyond the species' typical 15-to-19-year lifespan in North Africa. Addax care and reproduction have been part of the Louisville Zoo since opening, with more than 40 calves added to the population. Their contribution matters greatly as fewer than 100 addax remain in the wild.

Although less robust than in younger years, Roxanne and Ella are doing well in retirement together away from the herd, resting in thick grass and soft sand under attentive keeper care.

Lifelong Connections

Some longtime staff have accompanied animals across decades. Lead Keeper Silvia Zirkelbach has served the Louisville Zoo for 43 years and continues to delay her retirement to stay with Tomas, our woolly monkey, watching over him since birth to now 27 — well beyond his species' average lifespan. Ectotherm Curator Bill McMahan, a 45-year veteran, has overseen Audrey the Cuban crocodile for 39 years. Audrey entered the United States in 1970, making her at least 56, and has produced offspring that support this critically endangered species. Bill has also championed regional population management and personally participated in field study and conservation work with Cuban crocodiles.

Chip the Malayan Tapir

Along with Ivan, another elder statesman of the Louisville Zoo is Chip the Malayan tapir. At 31, Chip is currently the oldest Malayan tapir in North America and continues to thrive in the Islands habitat.

In addition to the exemplary care the animal and veterinary staffs provide, Chip's long life has been supported by the groundbreaking and innovative rotational facility design of Islands. No two days are the same for the Islands residents, and the dynamic spaces provide opportunities for special health-related training, observation, exercise and any needed convalescence. A similar approach guided the design of Gorilla Forest, where rotational spaces and built-in opportunities for exercise, choice and control helped support Helen throughout her remarkable life.

The Queen of Them All

The Louisville Zoo's Chilean flamingo flock is one of the largest in North America, with 76 birds and staff use ID bands more often than names to keep reliable health records in such a large flock. Among them is female Black-band #8 one of the Zoo's original animals from opening day more than 57 years ago. Now over 60, she has outlasted many keepers, curators, veterinarians and four zoo directors. Another flock mate that arrived in 2023 is 75 years old. The flock benefits from a large natural green space, freshwater pool, muddy nesting areas and an indoor pool for the coldest weather. These choices mimic natural habitats that support this long-lived species.

A tremendous amount of expertise, collaboration and compassion has gone into creating this legacy of longevity at the Louisville Zoo while supporting sustainable animal populations worldwide. Ivan the lemur does not know all of that. He just knows he likes the way that brush feels on his back.