



For Immediate Release

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Zoo Atlanta Gorillas Undergo Cardiac Exams

Groundbreaking month coincides with 50th anniversary of the arrival of Willie B.

ATLANTA – May 20, 2011 – On May 18 and 19, 2011, select members of the western lowland gorilla collection at Zoo Atlanta underwent a crucial health check: a cardiac exam. Cutting-edge technology and specialized veterinary techniques mark just two of the revolutionary advances made at Zoo Atlanta since the arrival of the late Willie B., five decades ago this month.

2011 marks the 50th anniversary of the beginning of what is now one of the nation's most renowned centers of excellence for the care and study of gorillas, inspired by the life of Zoo Atlanta's most famous ape. Born in Africa in approximately 1959, Willie B. arrived in what would become his home city in May 1961. Despite his meteoric rise to the status of a celebrity beloved by countless Atlantans, Willie B. lived alone in an indoor enclosure for 27 years prior to the opening of the acclaimed Ford African Rain Forest in 1988. He quickly adjusted to life as a troop leader, siring five offspring: Kudzoo (1994); Olympia (1996); Willie B., Jr. (1998); Sukari (1998); and Lulu (1999). All five currently reside at Zoo Atlanta, as do Willie B.'s three grandchildren, the youngest of whom was born to Kudzoo on May 9, 2011.

Based at Zoo Atlanta, the Great Ape Heart Project (GAHP) is targeted at the very disease ultimately responsible for the death of the legendary silverback, who passed away in 2000. The multi-institutional collaboration is the world's first effort to understand, diagnose, and treat cardiovascular disease in great apes (gorillas, orangutans, chimpanzees and bonobos) living in zoological settings. Funded by a prestigious 2010 grant from the federal Institute of Museum and Library Services, GAHP is led by Hayley Murphy, DVM, Director of Veterinary Services at Zoo Atlanta. Organizing partners include the Emerging Diseases Research Group of the University of Georgia College of Veterinary Medicine; the UC Davis College of Veterinary Medicine; and the Cleveland Metroparks Zoo.

"Cardiovascular disease is a leading cause of mortality among great apes living in zoos today, so its diagnosis and treatment are of critical importance to all accredited institutions housing these species," said Dwight Lawson, PhD, Deputy Director at Zoo Atlanta. "We are extremely proud and honored that our own veterinary and animal care professionals provide the level of talent, expertise and passion necessary to lead this charge, particularly given the legacy begun by Willie B."

Now home to the nation's largest collection of western lowland gorillas, Zoo Atlanta is a national leader in the husbandry, training and behavioral research of these critically endangered great apes. Zoo staff and colleagues have produced over 120 published scientific studies on gorilla behavior, and Zoo Atlanta remains committed to the preservation of wild gorillas and their habitats through partnership with The Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund International, which is headquartered on Zoo grounds.

Zoo Atlanta also houses four very special senior gorillas, which are considered geriatric after the age of about 35. Leading the pack is Shamba, who turns 52 on May 24. Shamba is joined by Ozzie, 50; Choomba, 50; and Ivan, 49. Because they were born in the wild, the four are considered founder individuals by the Gorilla Species Survival Plan, and Shamba, Ozzie and Choomba are the only surviving members of the Zoo's pioneer generation of gorillas. Of the 24 gorillas residing at Zoo Atlanta today, 20 are descended from Shamba, Ozzie or Choomba.

"It's been a privilege and an honor to observe not just the growth and milestones of these families, but also the dramatic progress I've observed in our gorilla program over my years here," said Charles Horton, Curator of Primates, who recently celebrated his 40th anniversary at Zoo Atlanta. "I've been here for some of the biggest moments of their lives, and I'm here for new moments every day. They're incredibly special, and I'm proud that Zoo Atlanta has made such an investment in the welfare of gorillas living not just here, but around the world."

About Zoo Atlanta

An accredited member of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA), Zoo Atlanta inspires value and preservation of wildlife through a unique mix of education and outdoor family fun. From well-known native wildlife to critically endangered species on the brink of extinction, the Zoo offers memorable close encounters with more than 1,000 animals from around the world. Complex Carnivores, a new series of exhibits featuring bush dogs, fossa and binturong, opened on April 1. Zoo Atlanta is also proud to be one of only four zoos in the U.S. that giant pandas call home: Lun Lun's newest cub, Po, born November 3, 2010, made his public debut in spring 2011. Other highlights include the nation's largest collection of western lowland gorillas, the nation's largest zoological collection of orangutans and a global center of excellence for the care and study of vanishing reptiles and amphibians. The Zoo is open daily with the exceptions of Thanksgiving and Christmas Day. Keeper talks, interactive wildlife shows, education programs and special events run year-round. For more information, call 404.624.WILD or visit zooatlanta.org.

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