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FRESNO CHAFFEE ZOO CELEBRATES THE FIRST REINTRODUCTION OF THE BLUNT-NOSED LEOPARD LIZARD WITH FRESNO, STATE, AND FEDERAL AGENCIES

Fresno, CA – On Wednesday, May 17, 2023, Fresno Chaffee Zoo - in partnership with Fresno State, Bureau of Land Management (BLM), California Department of Fish and Wildlife, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service - reintroduced ten blunt-nosed leopard lizards to the Panoche Plateau.

“This is a great moment for the recovery of the blunt-nosed leopard lizard. In just three years, we went from a dire situation with this population of lizards to a day that gives me hope that the species will thrive in the Panoche Hills. As we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Endangered Species Act, this effort reflects how species conservation depends on our dedicated partners,” said Michael Fris, field supervisor of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s Sacramento Fish and Wildlife Office.

The group announced their partnership in [November of 2021](#) to save the endangered species from extinction.

According to Acting BLM California State Ecologist Dr. Michael Westphal, "The Bureau of Land Management Central Coast Field Office began actively monitoring the blunt-nosed leopard lizard on the Panoche Plateau in 2009. Initial efforts were primarily based on visual monitoring, which was followed by capture and tissue collecting for what turned into a groundbreaking, range wide, genetic survey of the species that showed the Panoche Plateau population to be primordial, small, and isolated." Dr. Westphal further explained that “to reduce direct impacts to lizards from handling, and to increase sample size to improve statistical estimation of the population, BLM initiated a project to gather feces (scat) using detection dogs, and extract DNA in order to genotype individual lizards. The project resulted in the first successful extraction and sequencing of DNA from wild collected scat from any reptile species -- a result with wider application to reptile conservation above and beyond blunt-nosed leopard lizards. Ongoing scat collection and genotyping began to suggest a decline was happening in the late 2010s.”

In 2019, BLM partnered with Fresno State and the Fresno Chaffee Zoo to perform intensive surveys, which revealed that only a handful of lizards remained on the Plateau. “BLM immediately initiated negotiations with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and California Department of Fish and Wildlife to establish an assurance colony at the Fresno Chaffee Zoo,” stated Dr. Westphal. “Data collected by BLM since 2008 provided a compelling picture of the ongoing decline, and as a result, in July 2020, both agencies issued the crucial permits necessary for the gather to occur.”

Over the past few years, Fresno Chaffee Zoo has maintained the breeding program and collected vital data that improves our understanding of the endangered species. The Zoo started with five lizards and successfully grew the breeding colony to 60 lizards. After evaluating their health, 10 individuals were identified to be the first group of blunt-nosed leopard lizards to be reintroduced to the Panoche Plateau. Going forward, the Zoo aims to hatch 80 to 100 lizards a year to maintain the breeding colony at the Zoo while continuing to release blunt-nosed leopard lizards into the Panoche Plateau until a self-sustaining population is established.

While the Zoo worked on the breeding program at their facility, Fresno State students and the partnering organizations continued to visit the Panoche Plateau on a regular basis to evaluate the environment and look for any remaining blunt-nosed leopard lizards to collect vital data.

“Reintroducing endangered blunt-nosed leopard lizards is a major milestone for conservation in the San Joaquin Valley,” said assistant professor and herpetologist at Fresno State, Dr. Rory Telemeco. “We are proud of the role that Fresno State students and faculty played in making this dream a reality- the research of ten undergraduate students and three graduate students laid the groundwork for this achievement. We look forward to continued collaboration with Fresno Chaffee Zoo, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to ensure a successful recovery of this unique California species.”

The Zoo and partnering organizations will monitor the survival and reproduction of each individual blunt-nosed leopard lizard that is reintroduced to better understand the requirements for reintroducing the lizards to the San Joaquin Desert habitat. The Zoo then hopes to use their learnings to create a robust network of populations that can persist into the future.

Fresno Chaffee Zoo also celebrated a huge milestone for the blunt-nosed leopard lizard reintroduction effort when it received the news that it was one of six recipients whose projects will be funded by a partnership between the U.S. National Science Foundation (NSF) and the Paul G. Allen Family Foundation.

The \$1.2 million grant from NSF and the Paul G. Allen Family Foundation will allow the Zoo to monitor every reintroduced lizard and their offspring to assess recolonization success. Funds will also support a new internship program allowing under-represented communities to play an active role in conservation science. Fresno Chaffee Zoo intends to take the lessons learned from this project and apply them to other threatened populations in California’s Central Valley to help them further their mission to save wildlife.

The Zoo also celebrated the groundbreaking of its Conservation Action Center earlier this year, in partnership with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Bureau of Reclamation. This new facility will provide guests with the opportunity to see the Zoo’s conservation work in action.

“The blunt-nosed leopard lizard breeding program is a catalyst for the Zoo’s impact in local conservation work,” said Fresno Chaffee Zoo CEO and Director Jon Forrest Dohlin. “This is a major milestone for the Zoo. We have supported several conservation organizations over the years, and now, thanks to our partnerships, and this funding from NSF and the Paul G. Allen Family Foundation, we are poised to become leaders in local conservation science to help save native California species.”

The Conservation Action Center is scheduled to be completed by the end of 2023 and will provide guests with an inside view of the day-to-day operations of the critical care and research it takes to help save the blunt-nosed leopard lizard and serve as the anchor of the Zoo’s future conservation initiatives.

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About Fresno Chaffee Zoo: Centrally located in Fresno, California, Fresno Chaffee Zoo is a 39-acre Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) accredited zoo. It is home to over 200 different species and features WOW experiences—from Sea Lion Cove to African Adventure—that teach guests about animals from across the globe and the conservation efforts to protect them. The Zoo welcomes over 800,000 guests annually, offering a world-class guest experience and conservation education to all who visit. The mission of Fresno Chaffee Zoo is to inspire people to care for animals, create connections, build community and save wildlife.

About Telemeco Reptile Ecology and Evolution (TREE) Laboratory at Fresno State: The TREE laboratory is led by Dr. Rory Telemeco, an assistant professor and herpetologist at Fresno State, and includes a diverse group of undergraduate and graduate students. The laboratory studies how populations of native reptiles respond to environmental change to better inform conservation and management.

About the Bureau of Land Management: This year, we invite everyone to reimagine your public lands as we celebrate 75 years of the BLM's stewardship and service to the American people. The BLM manages approximately 245 million acres of public land located primarily in 12 Western states, including Alaska. The BLM also administers 700 million acres of sub-surface mineral estate throughout the nation. The agency's mission is to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of America's public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations.

About California Department of Fish and Wildlife: The California Department of Fish and Wildlife manages California's diverse fish, wildlife, and plant resources, and the habitats upon which they depend, for their ecological values and for their use and enjoyment by the public.

About U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service: The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service works with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.

About Blunt-Nosed Leopard Lizards: Blunt-nosed leopard lizards are only found in the San Joaquin Desert of central California, within the San Joaquin Valley and adjacent foothills, as well as the Carrizo Plain and Cuyama Valley. These lizards inhabit sparsely vegetated areas. The lizard uses rodent burrows for coverage from the harsh desert heat and is known to pounce on prey. The blunt-nosed leopard lizard is a relatively large lizard with a long tail; long, powerful legs; and a short, blunt snout. Adult males typically range in size from 3.4 to 4.7 inches in length, excluding their tail, and females are about 3.4 to 4.4 inches in length, excluding tail. Darker than other leopard lizards, blunt-nosed leopard lizards vary in color and pattern on their backs. Their background color ranges from yellowish or light gray-brown to dark brown, depending on the surrounding soil color and vegetation. Habitat disturbance, destruction, and fragmentation are the greatest threats to blunt-nosed leopard lizard populations.