



{FEATURE}

A CONSERVATION MILESTONE

MINNESOTA ZOO WELCOMES THE FIRST ASIAN WILD HORSE BORN IN 20 YEARS

{BY KELLY LESSARD—PUBLIC RELATIONS SPECIALIST }

The Minnesota Zoo celebrated a wonderful conservation milestone this summer with the birth of its first Asian wild horse (also known as a Przewalski's or Mongolian wild horse) since 1988. Once extinct in the wild, these horses are making a comeback thanks to international efforts by zoos.

Born on July 5, the male (named "Vladimir" by Northern Trail zookeeper Tim Hill) is the 41st foal born at the Zoo since 1987. A descendant of an imported stallion from the National Zoo in Washington, D.C. and a female from Germany, he is very important genetically to the Species Survival Plan (SSP) population.



Minnesota Zoo's Conservation Efforts

The Minnesota Zoo has exhibited Asian wild horses since opening its doors in 1978. In 1990, the Zoo sent a stallion to the Netherlands who produced six offspring for release in Hustai Nuruu National Park in Mongolia. These offspring have not only been released into the wild, but are continuing to produce offspring of their own. At last count, there were two harems still living in the wild that are directly descended from the Minnesota Zoo's stallion. In 2004, the Zoo supported the park with funds to purchase motor bikes, allowing the rangers to patrol the park and protect the horses. In 2006, the Zoo supported a radio-collar tracking project coordinated by the National Zoo in Kalameili Reserve, China. It is the SSPs hope that Asian wild horses will be released into this park in the future.

Asian Wild Horses

Asian wild horses are a very primitive species that are about the size of a large pony: adults are 13-14 hands tall and are 8-9 feet long. Sporting a white muzzle, they are light brown, cream, or yellow-gray in color with black tails, manes, nostrils and lower legs. Originally found throughout the steppes of Eurasia, this species was determined to be entirely extinct in the wild around the late 1960s. Thanks to the foresight of zoos, they were bred in captivity and eventually released in several parks throughout central Asia. In the wild, they eat coarse, shrubby vegetation and tall grasses. In captivity, their diet is hay, mixed grains, and vitamin/mineral supplements when necessary.

Mares are sexually mature between three and five years of age; stallions a year or so later. Gestation is about 11 months and most foals are born with a fuzzy mane, weighing 55-60 pounds. Generally, foals stay with their mother for two years.

Records of this species from at least 20,000 B.C. are present in the cave paintings of Lascaux, France. The existence of these horses was first reported to the western world in the late 1800s by Nicolai Przewalski, a Russian explorer. Later, he was presented with a hide and skull of a wild horse by native hunters; those items are now on display in a museum in Leningrad.