



TODAY IS A NEW DAY IN THE WILD FOR 26 EASTERN INDIGO SNAKES REARED AT ZOO ATLANTA

Zoo Atlanta is part of a partnership to restore an iconic species to its native range

ATLANTA – July 14, 2017 – A new chapter in the wild began today for 26 eastern indigo snakes reared at Zoo Atlanta in the latest milestone in a conservation partnership to restore a native species to its original range. In a collaboration between Zoo Atlanta, the Central Florida Zoo's Orianna Center for Indigo Conservation and Auburn University, the snakes were released into the Conecuh National Forest near Andalusia, Alabama, on July 14, 2017.

Previously to the beginning of a multi-year reintroduction effort, the eastern indigo snake had not been sighted in the wild in Alabama in around 50 years. The snakes are a keystone species of the longleaf pine-wiregrass and sandhills ecosystem, and their reintroduction carries significant positive ecological benefits for the national forest.

"Zoo Atlanta is known for its conservation work on other continents around the world, but conservation begins in our own backyards," said Hayley Murphy, DVM, Vice President of Animal Divisions at Zoo Atlanta. "This is a notable example of a project that continues to have a direct impact on re-establishing an iconic species in its native range."

Zoo Atlanta has reared more than 80 eastern indigo snakes for the reintroduction program, which is a cooperation among stakeholders throughout the Southeast. Additional project partners include the Alabama Department of Natural Resources, Georgia Department of Natural Resources, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission and The Nature Conservancy.

The newest group of reintroduced snakes had been reared at Zoo Atlanta since 2015. As they had been designated for release into the wild, the young snakes received care and feeding in behind-the-scenes facilities where they had limited interactions with humans. In this environment, the snakes were able to grow to a size capable of avoiding many of the predators that feed on juvenile snakes.

Prior to their release, the snakes received passive integrated responder tags (PIT) for identification. Preliminary results from tracking efforts have shown that previous groups of reintroduced snakes are surviving, thriving, and reproducing.

To date, more than 100 eastern indigo snakes have been released into Conecuh National Forest, a majority of which have been reared at Zoo Atlanta. The goal of the project is to release 300 snakes over a 10-year period at an average of 30 snakes a year.

The largest nonvenomous snake species in North America and a native of southern Georgia, Florida, Alabama, South Carolina and Mississippi, the eastern indigo snake has declined across its historic range with the destruction of its ecosystem. This decline is also observed in Georgia's state reptile, the gopher tortoise, which creates burrows that are often used by eastern indigo snakes and other species.

Eastern indigo snakes play an additional valuable role in their environment by keeping other snake populations in check, as they are known to eat venomous species, including copperheads. These snakes are not constrictors; instead, they overpower their prey using the crushing force of their jaws.

Visit zooatlanta.org/conservation to learn more about conservation programs and partnerships at Zoo Atlanta.

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About Zoo Atlanta

Viewed as one of the finest zoological institutions in the U.S. and a proud accredited member of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA), Zoo Atlanta has a mission to inspire value and preservation of wildlife through a unique mix of education and outdoor family experiences. 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. Zoo highlights include giant pandas, including Ya Lun and Xi Lun, a set of twins born to Lun Lun on September 3, 2016; North America's largest zoological population of great apes; and a global center of excellence for the care and study of reptiles and amphibians. Scaly Slimy Spectacular: The Amphibian and Reptile Experience, featuring more than 70 species in a 111,000 square-foot complex, is the world's first LEED Gold-certified reptile and amphibian exhibit. The Zoo's newest experience, Treetop Trail presented by Kaiser Permanente, opened in March 2017. Up-close-and-personal animal experiences include behind-the-scenes Wild Encounters with African elephants, Aldabra giant tortoises, giant pandas and warthogs. Zoo Atlanta 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, visit zooatlanta.org.

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