

# Sunny skies greeted ribbon cuttings on June 30



The City of Vernonia held ribbon cutting ceremonies at Vernonia Lake and Spencer Park on June 30, to celebrate improvements that have occurred at both locations between 2002 and now. Above left; Marilyn Lippincott, Senior Grants Program Coordinator and Representative Brad Witt cut the ribbon at Vernonia Lake. Above right: Glen Purvee, former Vernonia city councilor and strong supporter of Spencer Park improvements, was asked to cut the ribbon at Spencer Park. At Vernonia Lake, the improvements being celebrated included additional parking, an ADA-accessible restroom near the campground, and lighting on the path around the lake. Spencer Park improvements included grandstand seating, two full-sized backstops, paved parking and ADA accessible restrooms. Donated labor, equipment and materials at Spencer Park totaled \$98,000 and were instrumental in the improvements there.

## Zoo gives pygmy rabbit breeding season update

As the breeding season for Washington's endangered Columbia Basin pygmy rabbits nears its end, the Oregon Zoo is having its most successful breeding season ever. With 31 new rabbits, and the potential for several more before the end of summer, the zoo has taken a significant step toward saving the smallest rabbit in North America.

Just a few years ago, there were only 16 pygmy rabbits left in the entire state of Washington, near the small town of Ephrata. Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) biologists decided to remove the remaining rabbits from the wild and start an emergency captive-breeding program similar to the one used for California condors, which were

removed from the wild in the 1980s. Today, the rare pygmy rabbit appears poised to make a comeback. This fall, the Oregon Zoo, in conjunction with its conservation partners will release pygmy rabbits back into the wild for the first time.

"This tiny rabbit is a big success story," says Tony Vecchio, zoo director. "Collaborating with the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, Washington State University and Northwest Trek, we've worked tirelessly to help save Washington's endangered pygmy rabbits from certain extinction. Releasing rabbits back into eastern Washington this fall is a monumental milestone."

The zoo has built a pygmy rabbit pre-release pen at its Jonsson Center for Wildlife

Conservation.

"The rabbits are at the bottom of the food chain and must learn to avoid predators such as coyotes, red-tail hawks and owls," says Michael Illig, assistant curator in charge of the zoo's rabbit program. "By keeping the rabbits safe during their crucial first six months of life — a time when they are especially vulnerable to predators — we can help their chances of surviving in the wild. At six months old, they are much better equipped to apprehend danger before it is too late."

WDFW will conduct test releases in Eastern Washington near where the original rabbits were removed from the wild. Initially, WDFW will provide protection from predators. Eventually releases will occur near unoccupied or artificial burrows. In order to track the progress of the pygmy rabbits, radio transmitters will be attached to some of the rabbits so that researchers can monitor their movements, survival and reproduction over time.

Idaho pygmy rabbits arrived at the Oregon Zoo in December 2000. Zoo staff constructed behind-the-scenes habitats full of loose soil, with tubes to serve as

hiding places for the reclusive rabbits. They also constructed nest boxes fitted with infrared video cameras to monitor the rabbits' behavior. Using video recorders, scientists studied their activity patterns exhaus-

tively, learning the subtle behavioral nuances of the smallest rabbit in North America.

In 2001, the research paid off, as the Oregon Zoo became the first zoo in the world to successfully breed Idaho pygmy rabbits. Thereafter, the zoo bred the rare Washington pygmy rabbit.

With breeding protocols established, the zoo shared its research with the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. The protocols helped WDFW develop its pygmy rabbit breeding facility at Washington State University in Pullman.

"In the past, zoos have spread their conservation efforts all over the world, particularly in tropical areas," says Vecchio. "While these efforts have been extremely important, there has been a tendency to ignore our own backyards. At the Oregon Zoo, we feel that efforts in our own region will prove to be the most effective way to engage our visitors and constituents in conservation actions."

Today the Oregon Zoo is home to two full-blooded Washington pygmy rabbits: Lolo, a male, and Bryn, a female. In collaboration with WDFW, the zoo has crossbred Washington rabbits with Idaho rabbits to help strengthen genetic diversity. The zoo hopes to maintain a bloodline of 75 percent Washington and 25 percent Idaho.



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