



News Release

Samantha Haville
Marketing Manager
Parks and Recreation
City of Lafayette
(765) 807-1505
shaville@lafayette.in.gov

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
November 30, 2021

Suspected avian malaria disease hits penguin colony at Columbian Park Zoo

LAFAYETTE, IN – November 30, 2021– The Columbian Park Zoo has announced that six of their nine African penguin residents have died after a devastating battle with what appears to be avian malaria. The remaining three penguins, Shazam, Sagely, and Donner, are in critical condition.

“Avian malaria is one of the most significant causes of mortality in penguins, with rates as high as 50-90 percent,” stated Zoo Director Neil Dale. “Despite the best efforts of our veterinarian and staff, who provided around the clock care administering anti-malarial medications and other intensive care measures, we were unable to stop the progression of the infections.”

Avian malaria is a parasitic disease caused by the protozoan *Plasmodium* and transmitted through the bite of infected mosquitos. Affecting only birds, this form of malaria is not transmissible to humans or other zoo animals. It is also not transmissible from bird-to-bird. Penguins are considered particularly susceptible to the disease, and instances of the disease in captive populations often lead to high mortality.

On October 24, the African penguin, Flash, began exhibiting symptoms of illness, prompting a veterinary examination and a series of tests to determine the cause of illness. Despite exhaustive efforts to save him, Flash’s condition deteriorated rapidly and he was found deceased by animal care staff on the morning of October 28. Following this incident, a necropsy (animal autopsy) was performed, but returned with inconclusive results. However, on November 2, a blood test returned with a positive result for exposure to Plasmodium.

As soon as the disease was suspected within the colony, Dale stated that the Columbian Park Zoo staff utilized a wide variety of resources, including consulting experts across the country regarding treatment. The team worked with Indiana Animal Disease Diagnostic Laboratory at Purdue University and local experts as well.

“We’ve been consulting with veterinary experts from some of the leading zoos in the country to ensure that we are doing everything possible to best treat our birds,” said Caitlin Laffery, Assistant Zoo Director.



@LafayetteParks



@LafayetteParks



@LafayetteParks

“We are very fortunate to work in a profession where knowledge and expertise is shared so freely and to have resources like Purdue’s Indiana Animal Disease Diagnostic Laboratory right in our backyard.”

Since Flash’s death, the remaining eight penguins began exhibiting symptoms of illness, to varying degrees of severity. Five additional penguins have since died, including Raspberry, Zing, Chartreuse, Fozzie, and most recently, Zip, who was found deceased by animal care staff on the morning of November 28. Avian malaria symptoms include weakness, lethargy, and loss of appetite. Treatment includes anti-malarial medications, fluid and nutritional support, as well as prophylactic treatment to ward off opportunistic secondary infections, to which penguins are particularly susceptible.

Avian malaria is present in the North American wild bird population, and poses a known risk for penguins in human-managed settings such as zoos. Knowing this, the Columbian Park Zoo put exposure risk reduction strategies in place prior to the penguins’ arrival this summer. This includes a mosquito-abatement program and the use of prophylactic anti-malarial medications. Although devastating occurrences in zoos are relatively rare when exposure reduction strategies are employed, it is challenging to eliminate or prevent exposure while exhibiting penguins outdoors in this geographical location.

“We’ve been working around the clock to save as many birds as possible,” said Heather Woody, Head Zookeeper. “Our animal care team is absolutely heartbroken that something like this happened after all the months of hard work and preparation, but our focus now has to be on doing everything we can to help our penguins.”

Originally slated to open in spring of 2020, the Penguin Cove exhibit opened to the public on July 30, 2021. The exhibit experienced several COVID-19 related project delays as well as an additional travel delay this spring as the penguins went through a molting process. The new exhibit was funded by the City of Lafayette and generously supported by Don and Lois Stein and family through a gift to the Lafayette Parks Foundation.

Looking to the future, Dale said the Columbian Park Zoo is working with the Penguin Cove exhibit’s original design team to come up with additional protective measures for the exhibit. Furthermore, the zoo staff is continuing to consult experts in the field regarding other preventative measures that may be taken to ward off future exposures.

“We know that the community will share in our grief during this incredibly sad time. The entire zoo staff has been emotionally invested in this penguin colony and has felt the loss of each bird deeply,” said Dale, who mentioned that cards of support for the zoo staff can be directed to the Zoo’s mailing address at 1915 Scott St, Lafayette, IN 47904.

For more information about the Columbian Park Zoo, please call 765-807-1540 or visit columbianparkzoo.org. Stay up to date on Zoo happenings at www.facebook.com/cpzoo and www.twitter.com/ColumbianPrkZoo

About Columbian Park Zoo

Founded in 1908, Columbian Park Zoo is the second oldest zoo in Indiana. It is approximately 6 acres in size and is located in historic Columbian Park. The Zoo features several “immersion” exhibits and the animal collection consists of nearly 200 animals representing approximately 90 species.

About Lafayette Parks and Recreation



@LafayetteParks



@LafayetteParks



@LafayetteParks

The Lafayette Parks and Recreation Department operates and maintains 700 acres of land within the City of Lafayette. This includes the maintenance of more than 27 miles of paved trails. The city's trails are open to the public and can be used for a variety of activities including walking, running, biking, rollerblading, and more.

###



@LafayetteParks



@LafayetteParks



@LafayetteParks