



Cobby, Oldest Male Chimpanzee in the U.S. and Beloved by Generations, Passes Away at Age 63

SAN FRANCISCO, Calif. — June 6, 2021 — “Cobby,” the venerable and oldest male chimpanzee in any accredited North American zoo, passed away on June 5, 2021 at age 63 at the San Francisco Zoo & Gardens. Cobby was beloved by generations of zoo-goers as a fan favorite. The cause of death is still to be determined, but he had recently been ill and old age was a contributing factor.

“Our hearts are broken with this devastating loss,” said Tanya M. Peterson, CEO and Executive Director of San Francisco Zoological Society. “Cobby was both a charismatic and compassionate leader of our chimpanzee troop. For so many years, he was a protective companion, demonstrating patience and resiliency. He also was a favorite of visitors and staff, recognizing so many of us. He was one of the first animals whom I personally knew as Director. His death will be felt deeply by our staff, many of whom cared for him for decades.”

Cobby’s companions for more than 42 years, females Minnie and Maggie, are both approximately 52 years of age; his absence will be especially hard for them. A third female, Tallulah, passed away in 2013. Brought here in the mid-1960s, the four chimpanzees initially lived together at Triple Grotto, an outdoor moated exhibit considered state-of-the-art when first built. Over time, the Zoo’s innovative and novel approaches to caring for the aging chimps resulted in a troop comprised of some of the oldest chimpanzees currently living under human care.

Before he was placed at SF Zoo, Cobby was a performing chimpanzee who was human-reared. As such, his relationships with his caregivers was almost as important as his relationships with his troop members. According to the staff who cared for him, they say that what they will miss most is how he expressed his “goodnight” to them with a soft pant-hoot.

In 2019, the group moved to the new Great Ape Passage (GAP), a multi-million dollar expanded habitat specifically designed to enable geriatric animals to integrate with younger troop members. The GAP includes indoor and outdoor options, including a 70-long elevated passageway which soars above the visitor pathway below. An indoor dayroom with climbing structures and multi-level platforms allows chimps and humans to see each other close-up, separated only by a large viewing window. Our elderly chimps were fascinated by this new perspective, especially Cobby, as the windows offered a chance to engage directly with visitors.

An amazing, heartwarming story of acceptance and change transpired during the past two years, with the gradual introduction of four adult chimpanzees transferred from other zoological parks in 2018 and 2019. The expanded group successfully integrated, with much credit given to Cobby, the respected elder who was able to bring together this newly formed group. The addition brought the Zoo’s chimpanzee troop to seven individuals for the first time in more than half a century.

To build upon the existing troop, it was necessary to find suitable individuals within the accredited zoological community that needed a new home. To do this, primate experts serving on the Association of Zoo and Aquariums' (AZA) Chimpanzee Species Survival Plan (SSP) Management Group reviewed the behavior profiles of potential new group members to find the best fit.

The integration was a long process, with Cobby initially paired with "Gombus," a then-34-year-old male. Cobby had never lived with males until recently and he was able to be a role model for appropriate male-to-male relationships while maintaining strong bonds with his long-time female companions. According to staff, they quickly became inseparable. Soon after, a 28-year-old male chimp named "Michael" was introduced successfully to Cobby and Gombus, using the same male-to-male bonding approach. He also played an essential part in bonding the new females, 34-year-old "Connie" and 42-year-old "Beth" into the troop.

Cobby enjoyed resting on the various platforms, snacking on his favorite foods, and even as a senior, climbing up high to hang out with his favorite girl Minnie, and he loved interacting with his caregivers. Even though he leaves behind no living offspring, according to staff, his cherished nickname was "Papa."

Chimpanzees (*Pan troglodytes*) are listed as endangered by the International Union for Conservation and Nature (IUCN) Red List and are among the most at risk primates in Africa, with a wild population of between 100,000 to 200,000 individuals due to threats such as hunting, habitat loss and disease. The average life expectancy is 33 years in the wild, and 50-60 under human care.

"Cobby was part of San Francisco," said Peterson. "He touched so many lives, and people have so many memories of him. He is irreplaceable, and our hearts are broken. We will all miss seeing his handsome grey beard watching over us from the top platform of the yard."

About San Francisco Zoo & Gardens

Established in 1929, San Francisco Zoo & Gardens connects people to wildlife, inspires caring for nature and advances conservation action. An urban oasis, the Zoo & Gardens is home to more than 2,000 exotic, endangered and rescued animals representing more than 250 species as well as seven distinct gardens full of native and unusual plants. Located at the edge of the Pacific Ocean where the Great Highway meets Sloat Boulevard. Guests to SF Zoo & Gardens must follow mandated safety procedures when visiting at this time due to COVID-19. Visit www.sfzoo.org for more information.