

Packy the elephant (1962-2017)

By Jessie McClendon

On April 14, 1962, the Portland Zoological Gardens (now called the Oregon Zoo) made history when a 225-pound Asian elephant was born to parents Thonglaw and Belle. The elephant was known as Fuzzy Face for the first few weeks of his life, until Portland radio station KPOJ sponsored a baby-naming contest. Gresham teacher Wayne W. French thought up the clever play on pachyderm, and Packy had a name.

Perhaps the most notable animal at the zoo today, Packy was considered a phenomenon throughout the zoo world. He was the first elephant born in the Western Hemisphere in forty-four years, and his birth marked a turning point for elephant captive-breeding programs worldwide.

For three months before Packy was born, veterinarian Dr. Matthew Maberry kept a close eye on Belle. Now a distinguished authority on elephant birth, he acknowledged that before Packy's arrival little was known about maternal behavior, fetal development, and a host of other details associated with captive elephant birth. Twenty-eight calves have been born at the zoo since 1962, and the facility has become a leader in understanding the care, enrichment, and captive breeding of Asian elephants.

Community support has helped enhance and protect the lives of these complex, intelligent animals. A \$125 million bond measure that passed in November 2008, for example, will support the expansion of the elephant enclosure and the building of a planned 140-acre remote elephant center.

On April 14, 2012, Packy celebrated his fiftieth birthday. After a long battle with recurring tuberculosis, Packy was euthanized and died on February 9, 2017. He was almost 55 years old. A crowd favorite for decades, he was the largest Asian elephant in the United States—10 feet 6 inches tall and about 13,500 pounds. His birth in 1962 and his care and development at the Oregon Zoo have been instrumental in shaping wildlife conservation efforts, developing captive-breeding facilities, and enabling zoo professionals to better understand the nature and complexity of Asian elephants.

Sources

Color footage from Packy's birth in 1962. <http://www.youtube.com/user/oregonzoo#p/c/E07B324227FFB082/10/DZqRimO35Oc>

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