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Dane County's Henry Vilas Zoo Throwing Weekend "Baby Shower" to Celebrate Upcoming New Arrival

Orangutans "Kawan" and "Datu" Soon to be Proud Parents as Zoo Readies for First Great Ape Birth in 14 years

Two familiar faces at Dane County's Henry Vilas Zoo are soon to be proud parents and the Zoo is hosting a community "baby shower" this weekend to celebrate what will be the first great ape birth here since 2001.

Bornean orangutans "Kawan" and "Datu" were matched as part of the National Association of Zoos and Aquariums Orangutan Species Survival Plan (SSP); an effort to help maintain a population of this endangered species. Their little one is due in the next 6-8 weeks.

Kawan was born at the Henry Vilas Zoo back in 2001.

"In addition to offering free fun family entertainment, our zoo rightly takes a lot of pride in the work it does to protect endangered species and raise awareness on efforts we all can take to help these amazing animals," Dane County Executive Joe Parisi said.

"This upcoming birth is so important and thrilling for both the zoo and the national species survival efforts as a whole and we couldn't be happier to make this announcement and share our excitement with our very supportive community," Zoo Director Ronda Schwetz said.

The gestation period for an orangutan is similar to human mothers at 8-9 months. The zoo has partnered with local human medical professionals Dr. Jenny Hackforth-Jones and ultrasound technician Barb Trampe to help make sure Kawan and her baby have quality care. Both UW and Meriter Hospitals have supported this effort and donated an ultrasound machine no longer used for human health care to help with pre-natal care.

“I believe new life is a wonder to explore and celebrate,” Trampe said. “Sharing my expertise from the human world with the animal world has been the privilege of a lifetime.”

Thanks to regular training sessions, Kawan voluntarily participates in ultrasounds, allowing zoo and medical professionals to monitor the growth and development of the baby during gestation.

Similar to human pregnancies, there are particular risks associated with first time orangutan mothers and babies. “Henry Vilas Zoo is a model of preparatory training and husbandry for birth management and has done a fantastic job getting ready for this important birth,” said Lori Perkins, Orangutan SSP Chair.

In partnership with the Friends of the Zoo, the zoo will host a community celebration starting at 12:00 p.m. this Saturday, February 14, in the Primate Building. Kawan and Datu will open specially made wrapped presents in their indoor holding in front of zoo guests in honor of the new arrival.

Those looking to contribute to the baby shower can make a donation to the Zoo’s Animal Welfare Fund which supports the exceptional care given to our animals at: www.vilaszoo.org.

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