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May 24, 2017

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Investigation yields likely cause of cat escape

Zoo guests can see jaguars next week

ABILENE, TEXAS – The Abilene Zoo’s staff team has concluded an investigation of the zoo’s jaguar enclosure and believes they have discovered the most likely chain of events that occurred the morning of May 15.

Staff from the veterinary, animal care, and maintenance departments joined forces to research the details, create a timeline, and examine the cats’ living quarters looking for clues.

“It has been determined that the escape began when the animal scaled a 12-foot-tall artificial rock wall and forced her way under the cable and netting top,” said Director Bill Gersonde. “She gained access to a crawl space between that rock wall and a cinderblock wall, scaled the cinderblock wall and forced her way out of an approximate 8-inch gap between that wall and the exhibit mesh top.”

The 100-pound size and active age of the two-year-old cat certainly contributed to her ability to wriggle out of the enclosure, Gersonde said, which has housed jaguars for more than 22 years without incident.

Zoo staff plans to remedy the slender escape portal using horizontal and vertical rebar that will block animals from being able to lift the metal netting securing the top.

Once staff is confident that the cats and guests are safe, the zoo plans to allow the two jaguar sisters back into their lair early next week.

Born at the Fort Worth Zoo, jaguar sisters Luna and Estrella came to Abilene in February 2016, celebrating their second birthday this month.

Estrella managed to leave the cats’ enclosure sometime early Monday, May 15, while the zoo was closed to the public. All doors were locked. Staff discovered the animal perched above the neighboring spider monkey exhibit and called a “Code Red,” for the escape at approximately 8:10 a.m. Following procedure, the cat was sedated, relocated and examined by veterinary staff. She was back in her off-exhibit quarters before 9 a.m.

“Again, the zoo staff is to be commended on their response to this emergency,” Gersonde said. “Thank you to the community for their kind messages of support and praise as the zoo addressed this challenging situation.”

The Abilene Zoo staff conducts monthly drills to prepare for many emergency and non-emergency situations, including lost children, venomous snake bites, active shooter situations, and escaped animals of different threat levels.

About the Abilene Zoo:

Since its founding in 1966, the Abilene Zoo has stood as a place of learning and adventure, where visitors make memories, share the joy of discovery and become inspired to preserve wildlife. Situated on 16 acres in the award-winning Grover Nelson Park, the zoo provides a special encounter in a lushly landscaped walkable setting with more than 1000 animals of 270 species from around the globe. The zoo is open 7 days a week (closed Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Day, and New Year's Day) from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Last admittance is 4 p.m. Tickets are \$7 for adults, \$4.50 for children ages 3-12, \$6 for seniors aged 60 and older. Members are admitted free. www.abilenezoo.org. 325-676-6085.