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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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**Abilene Zoo breaks attendance record**

*Guests vote Ocelot conservation as favorite cause*

ABILENE, TEXAS – The Abilene Zoo’s 50<sup>th</sup> year won the gold.

More than 249,600 guests visited the zoological gardens in fiscal 2016, setting an all-time record for annual attendance and bringing almost 33,000 more guests than the previous year.

“What’s also amazing is that we did this during one of the rainiest years in recent memory,” said Director Bill Gersonde. “Zoo attendance is always affected by weather days, but we’ve enjoyed our rain-drenched gardens while entertaining excellent crowds.”

Certainly, the long-awaited Giraffe Safari opening in late April was a driving force for visitors, along with the zoo’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations and the recent birth of a giraffe calf.

More than half of zoo guests – about 53 percent – came to the Abilene Zoo from other cities throughout the state, while 47 percent were locals. Memberships also have grown this year, with more than 2,500 families joining the zoo, many from nearby cities like San Angelo and Midland. What’s more, the zoo’s wild bird rehabilitation program treated and released a record number of native birds this year – nearly 400 animals.

Also new this season was the zoo’s Quarters for Conservation initiative, which allocated 25 cents from each gate admission toward animal conservation. Admission to the zoo has always included support for animal preservation, but the Quarters for Conservation kiosk helps guests visualize and participate in that process. Visitors selected their favorite of three Texas-based programs to devote their quarters -- and then tossed symbolic washers into the corresponding wishing well for that animal program. Many donated pocket change, too.

Those votes now have been tallied, and guests overwhelmingly chose ocelots as their favorite this year: The Zoological Society will gift \$10,000 to the Friends of the Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge in South Texas, a group that works to save ocelots and their diminishing habitat. The Turtle Survival Alliance will receive a \$5,000 donation; while Friends of the Attwater’s Prairie Chickens will receive \$2,500. Representatives from these groups will visit Abilene next week to meet with staff, tour the zoo’s programs and pick up the donations.

Three new animal conservation groups now are highlighted at the kiosk, allowing guests to donate to endangered African vultures, rhinoceros or lions.

**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 has more than 1000 animals of 270 species from around the globe. The zoo is open 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily. Last admittance is 4 p.m. The zoo is open until 9 p.m. each Thursday all summer, with last admittance at 8 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](http://www.abilenezoo.org). 325-676-6085.

***Mission Statement:** The Abilene Zoo is a place of learning and adventure, where families make memories, share the joy of discovery and become inspired to preserve wildlife.*