



PO Box 50220
Idaho Falls, ID 83405

PRESS RELEASE

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City of Idaho Falls Contact

Kerry Hammon
Public Information Officer
Work: (208) 612-8122
Cell: (208) 821-6321
khammon@idahofallsidaho.gov

Idaho Falls Zoo Caring for Terminally Ill Snow Leopard

Idaho Falls, ID – A significant and sudden weight loss in July was the first sign that alerted Zookeeper Dallas LaDucer that something was changing with the 7-year-old male snow leopard, Ketu.

“We spend every day with over 300 animals that are as close to us as family members. We know them very well,” states Idaho Falls Zoo Veterinarian Dr. Rhonda Aliah. “We recognize how they vary in age, level of care required, personalities, and preferences. When one of them begins to act differently, or show physical signs of change, we notice. That level of familiarity is how we noticed something was going on with Ketu,” explains Aliah.

At the Idaho Falls Zoo, every animal is observed daily by documenting food intake, examining waste output and observing behavior. Exams are done at intervals as prescribed for each species. Each exam includes a standard physical exam, bloodwork and vaccinations as needed, as well as examination of teeth, claws, beaks, etc. If a concern arises, the zookeeper alerts veterinary staff immediately. The animal is then examined and necessary testing is conducted right away.

The zoo’s cats are trained to step on a scale to record their weight at least once each month. While it is normal for a cat’s weight to fluctuate with the seasons, Ketu’s weight loss seemed more pronounced. “An obvious weight loss was my first red flag, even though he was eating well and acting normally at the time,” says LaDucer who documented the weight loss and reported it to veterinary staff Dr. Rhonda Aliah and Veterinary Technician Alison Holderman.

Within 2-3 days, Ketu’s appetite suddenly declined and he began acting lethargic. The animal care team then sedated Ketu and took blood for testing. The results that came back were definite and disheartening. At only 7 years old, Ketu was diagnosed with acute renal (kidney) failure.

Kidney failure is a common problem among domestic cats and a leading cause of death in household pets. Why would an otherwise healthy, middle-aged cat have kidney failure? “Unfortunately, we don’t know,” states Dr. Aliah who contacted veterinarians around the country involved in the care of snow leopards. They discussed treatment options and devised a treatment plan for Ketu. “You could say it’s similar to an otherwise healthy person getting an unexpected illness,” states Holderman. “We don’t really understand what the causes are.”

“Despite all our best efforts to provide the best treatment, testing and professional consultations, it is probable Ketu will eventually succumb to his illness,” states Dr. Aliah. “As with any illness, no one knows how long he has left.”

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“Rolf, our red-ruffed lemur who passed away last month from age-related illness at 34 years old had exhibited signs of kidney failure for over six years,” states Dr. Aliah. “Our goal is to make Ketu as comfortable as possible for the remainder of his life.”

Since discovering Ketu’s illness, zookeepers have changed his diet in an effort to improve his weight. He now is offered several types of meat, including chicken, pork, and beef so that he can eat what he chooses.

Ketu is sedated at regular intervals to provide therapy, to examine and re-evaluate his condition, and draw blood for testing. He is provided with other treatment deemed warranted by blood work. “We have seen a very slight improvement in his blood values,” explains Dr. Aliah. “We will continue with the path of treatment.”

Ketu has fathered three cubs, all of which have been born at the Idaho Falls Zoo. The most recent cub, Tashi, was born last year. As part of the Species Survival Plan, Tashi is moving to the Chattanooga Zoo this fall for the opportunity to contribute to the conservation of his species by eventually becoming a father himself.

Snow leopards are normally very solitary animals. Unless it is breeding season, they avoid one another. Mothers with cubs will actively move throughout their territories to keep the family away from male cats. In captive situations, they are not housed together when cubs are present. Ketu, however, is a bit of an exception. He seeks out the female, Sundari, and is tolerant of Tashi. Therefore, to make him comfortable, the family is able to interact with each other whenever they want.

“For anyone who has ever loved another living thing, the hardest part is saying goodbye. We know for Ketu the time will come sooner than later,” says Dr. Aliah. Zoo staff will keep the public updated on Ketu’s situation as is warranted via the [Idaho Falls Zoo Facebook page](#).

Media Note: For more information or to schedule an interview with zoo staff, contact Public Information Officer, Kerry Hammon.

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About Idaho Falls Zoo at Tautphaus Park: *With more than 330 individual animals representing 130 species from all around the globe, the Idaho Falls Zoo has the largest collection of animals in the state of Idaho and is considered the “Best Little Zoo in the West.” Accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, the zoo participates in 44 national Species Survival Plans. Learn more on our [website](#).*

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