

## **WHAT'S HOPPIN': Celebrate the Lunar New Year!** *Zoo highlights small, but mighty, species to ring in the Year of the Rabbit*

SEATTLE—This weekend, people around the world will usher in the 2023 Lunar New Year on January 22, and this year it's the Year of the Rabbit! Lunar New Year is celebrated across the globe, but especially in East Asia, where traditions and interpretations are as unique as the many cultures that mark this special date.



Rabbits have long symbolized good luck; therefore, the rabbit is considered the luckiest of the 12 animals in the Chinese zodiac. Rabbits can also symbolize prosperity, cleverness and fertility. The Chinese zodiac suggests that those born during the Year of the Rabbit will be gentle, elegant and creative.

At Woodland Park Zoo, two rabbits live at the Family Farm. Ten-year-old Winston the rabbit has tortoise-shell fur with lovely dapples of orangey-brown and black. Keaton, 6, is the zoo's gray-furred Flemish giant rabbit. His breed is one of the largest in the world—males can weigh 15 to 20 pounds!

Leah Miyamoto is a licensed veterinary technician at the zoo; she fell in love with rabbits after meeting one at the zoo years ago and now has four at home. "Ever since, my love grew ever bigger for these wondrous little creatures of big feet and long ears. They are frequently underappreciated as pets because they can be litter box trained, sometimes sweet and friendly and very good companions," said Miyamoto.

To celebrate the Year of the Rabbit and show gratitude for the good fortune bunnies bring, the zoo is shining a spotlight on North America's smallest bunny that many may have never heard of before, the pygmy rabbit *Brachylagus idahoensis*. The Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit in Washington was listed as a federally endangered species in 2001 due to its drastically declining population. Still, efforts are underway to help these bunnies bounce back.

These cute critters are very tiny; in fact, pygmy rabbits grow just shy of 12 inches long and only weigh up to about 16 ounces. Female pygmy rabbits are typically a little larger than their male counterparts. The bunnies are grayish in color, turning browner during the summer.

Pygmy rabbits depend on sagebrush habitats for survival, digging burrows into the ground for shelter and munching on the sagebrush and other plants for food. Starting 150 years ago, the expansion of agriculture in eastern Washington decreased the availability of habitat for pygmy rabbits. But the species is highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Now, their homes are threatened by warmer, drier drought conditions and more frequent wildfires.

“The conservation efforts for these rabbits are critical for the survival of this species here in Washington state,” said Katie Remine, Living Northwest Conservation Manager. “I volunteer in the field in Eastern Washington to help out with the recovery of this species, and I encourage everyone to learn more about this adorable creature.”

Since 2001, a significant effort has been underway to save the Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit, spearheaded by the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and other organizations. The partners created a head-start program, breeding the bunnies and releasing them once they’re ready to survive on their own; more than 2,000 rabbits have been released since 2011.

**Happening at the zoo this weekend:**

Celebrate the Lunar New Year and pygmy rabbits at Zoomazium! Guests can expect special bunny-themed crafts like making wearable rabbit ears and other educational resources about pygmy rabbits and the ecosystem they call home.

**Zoomazium hours:** Open daily 9:30 a.m. – 3:00 p.m., closed on Tuesdays

To learn more about animal species living in the Pacific Northwest and steps you can take to save wildlife across the region, visit [zoo.org/livingnorthwest](http://zoo.org/livingnorthwest). Woodland Park Zoo has long supported shrub steppe conservation in Eastern Washington through the [Raptor Ecology of the Shrub Steppe program](#). The zoo’s unique Living Northwest conservation program helps to recover native wildlife populations, establish long-term ecological resilience in Northwest landscapes and empower all people to be wildlife conservationists.

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