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Pawsitively Precious: Zoo Welcomes Snow Leopard Cubs



SEATTLE—Woodland Park Zoo is seeing spots after three snow leopard cubs were born on Memorial Day. These are the first snow leopard cubs to be born at the zoo since a single cub, Aibek, was born in 2017.

The cubs were born to parents Marai, 7, and Aibek, 6. This is their first litter of cubs after they were paired under the Snow Leopard [Species Survival Plan](#), a cooperative breeding program across accredited zoos to help ensure a healthy, self-sustaining population of the species.

The mom and cubs are currently in an off-view maternity den to allow bonding and proper nursing in a quieter setting. Zoo staff closely watch the mother and cub on a den camera to watch for normal behaviors. It will be at least a couple months before the cubs are introduced to the outdoor, on-view exhibit.

“As a first-time mom, Marai has amazed us with the level of care she's been giving her cubs,” said Chris Scheetz, an animal keeper at Woodland Park Zoo. “Given how vocal and active the cubs already are, we’re excited for guests to see them later this summer, and we expect they will bring a lot of energy and excitement to the snow leopard habitat.”

Cubs are born helpless, with their eyes closed. They exclusively nurse from their mother for about two to three months before they are ready to start eating solid food. To minimize disturbance, staff have minimal physical contact with the new family. Since snow leopards are solitary animals in the wild, their father and grandmother Helen are housed separately. Guests can see either Aibek and Helen, 19, the mother of Aibek, on exhibit until the cubs are ready to make their debut.

Snow leopards are listed as a Vulnerable species on the IUCN Red List. The snow leopard is a moderately large cat native to the high mountain ranges of Central Asia and Russia, including in Afghanistan, China, India, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Nepal and Pakistan. According to the Seattle-based Snow Leopard Trust, the population of these vulnerable big cats in the wild is estimated to be between 4,000 and 6,390.

“These cubs are critical to help sustain a healthy population of snow leopards at zoos around the world, and they will go on to be incredible conservation

ambassadors for their cousins in the wild,” said Erin Sullivan, an animal curator at Woodland Park Zoo.

Woodland Park Zoo has long been a conservation partner with the [Snow Leopard Trust](#) (SLT) and the zoo has been caring for snow leopards since the zoo’s first snow leopards arrived in 1972 from the USSR. The Snow Leopard Trust was created in 1981 by the late Woodland Park Zoo staff member Helen Freeman, the namesake of our snow leopard Helen.

Through innovative programs, effective partnerships, and the latest science, the SLT is saving these beautiful cats and improving the lives of people who live in the snow leopard countries of Central Asia.

SLT recently completed a comprehensive long-term ecological study revealing that snow leopards utilize significantly larger home ranges than previously understood. Through collaboration with local governments, SLT has secured a commitment to safeguard a quarter of the world's snow leopard habitat and foster coexistence between humans and snow leopards in 23 mountainous landscapes.

To help ensure the future of snow leopards in their native range, the zoo asks the community to support the zoo and the Snow Leopard Trust, and pledge never to buy or sell illegal animal products on the black market. You can learn more about SLT and how you can help protect these majestic cats by visiting zoo.org/snowleopards.

Woodland Park Zoo offers a safe, outdoor experience for all. Visit zoo.org for information. Zoo hours: 9:30 a.m.–6:00 p.m. daily through September 2. Follow the zoo on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#) and [TikTok](#).

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