

MARYLAND ZOO

NEWS

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THE MARYLAND ZOO RELEASES FAMOUS LEGO® TURTLE TO NATIVE HABITAT

BALTIMORE, MD – Two years after arriving at The Maryland Zoo in need of extensive veterinary surgery and a customized LEGO® wheelchair, a wild Eastern box turtle has returned to its native habitat in Baltimore’s Druid Hill Park.

The turtle was fitted with a transmitter and released this morning. Zoo officials hope to track his movements as a part of their Eastern box turtle monitoring program.

BACKGROUND –

“In July 2018, an injured turtle was found in Druid Hill Park by a Zoo employee, and was brought to the Zoo’s hospital for treatment,” said Dr. Ellen Bronson, senior director of animal health, conservation, and research at the Zoo. “He had multiple fractures on his plastron, the bottom part of his shell. Because of the unique placement of the fractures, we faced a difficult challenge with maintaining the turtle’s mobility while allowing him to heal properly.”

The Zoo’s veterinary team performed surgery to stabilize the turtle’s severely fractured shell. Metal bone plates, sewing clasps and surgical wire now hold the delicate shell fragments together.

At the time, Garrett Fraess, a veterinary extern at the Zoo said, “It was important to keep the bottom of the shell off the ground so it could heal properly. They don’t make turtle-sized wheelchairs. So, we drew some sketches of a customized wheelchair and I sent them to a friend who is a LEGO® enthusiast.”

The sketches proved to be a success and the turtle received his very own multi-colored LEGO® brick wheelchair just a few weeks after surgery. The turtle is roughly the size of a grapefruit. The small LEGO® frame surrounds his shell and sits on four LEGO® wheels. Plumbers putty attaches the device to the edges of the turtle’s upper shell, which gets him off of the ground and allows his legs to be freed up so he can move.”

With the strength of his front legs, the turtle used his unique transportation to move around inside and outside. The design allows him to exhibit natural behaviors, such as fully closing his shell if he feels threatened.

“Turtles heal much slower than mammals and birds, since their metabolism is slower so, this turtle used his LEGO® wheelchair through the winter and into the spring of 2019 until all of the fragments were fused together and the shell was almost completely healed,” said Dr. Bronson. “He needed additional time to fully heal, but we were able to take the wheelchair device off him. We kept him at the Hospital and continued to monitor his progress, giving him ample exercise time to strengthen his legs in preparation for release.”

“This turtle has made tremendous progress in shell healing over the last two years. From his successful use of a LEGO® wheelchair as a mobility aid early in his recovery to now, he has been a unique Zoo patient. It was a joy for our veterinary team to watch him return to his native habitat today,” said Dr. Bronson.

Since 1996, the Zoo has led a Druid Hill Park Eastern box turtle monitoring project. To date, 132 wild turtles have been recorded, tagged and released. The project helps the conservation staff to get a better idea how a native Maryland species is thriving in an urban park setting, and sheds light on turtle territory ranges and behaviors in this rapidly declining species. “This particular turtle was originally tagged in 2000, making him at least 18-years-old,” continued Bronson. “We are very happy that he is recovering well from his injuries and we plan to return him to the wild once he is fully healed.”

Eastern box turtles can be seen in the Zoo’s Maryland Wilderness area.

About The Maryland Zoo in Baltimore

Founded in 1876, The Maryland Zoo in Baltimore is the third oldest zoo in the United States and is internationally known for its contributions in conservation and research. More than 1,500 animals are represented in the Zoo’s varied natural habitat exhibits such as the award-winning Penguin Coast, Polar Bear Watch, the Maryland Wilderness, African Journey and the Children’s Zoo. Situated in Druid Hill Park near downtown Baltimore, the Zoo is accredited by the Association of Zoos & Aquariums. For more information, visit www.marylandzoo.org.

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