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Guess Who's Back? Great Apes Return to the Zoo with Grand Opening of African Forest Friday, August 31

August 29, 2018-- *Jacksonville, FL* – Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens (JZG) is excited to announce the grand opening of the African Forest, the newly redesigned, wellness-inspired home of the great apes, monkeys and lemurs.

The Zoo is celebrating the opening of the African Forest and the return of the gorillas, bonobos, lemurs, mandrills and colobus monkeys on August 31 and the festivities will continue through Labor Day, Monday, September 3.

Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens closed the former Great Ape Loop in July of 2017 to begin the process of completely transforming the dated exhibit into a world-class home for primates. Architects, Zoo staff and designers envisioned a habitat focused on the animals' wellness while promising an outstanding experience for guests.

A 50-foot tall, replica Kapok tree is the heart of the new habitat, that will be enjoyed by the gorillas, bonobos, mandrills and colobus monkeys. Designed as a "time-share" feature, one day guests might see gorillas in the tree and the next day see an entirely different species. The animals will be encouraged to climb, explore, and problem-solve in unique and innovative ways. They will enjoy views, heights, challenges and opportunities

Meandering through the African Forest is an elevated trail system that will allow the different animals access to the Kapok tree. Similar to the trails in the award-winning Land of the Tiger, guests will be amazed as they watch animals walk over-head as they traverse the exhibit. Animals will be making more decisions, experiencing more control and being given more choices than ever before.

Throughout the past few weeks, incredible changes to the project have come to completion. Guests and staff have watched in awe as the in-house teams and outside specialists worked diligently to finish the \$9 million renovation. It is time to celebrate the Zoo's remarkable accomplishment and see the animals in their gorgeous, one-of-a kind new home!

“It has been fun to watch the excitement and anticipation growing. Our regular visitors and members have been able to see the African Forest exhibit taking shape, from the groundbreaking a year ago to the animals being introduced to their new spaces in the past few days,” said Tony Vecchio, Jacksonville Zoo and Garden's Executive Director. “Everyone who has been following the progress knows – this is not like any zoo exhibit they have ever seen before. It's going to be an incredible experience for the animals who live there and for our guests who come to see it.”

The African Forest Opening Preview Weekend activities include a ribbon cutting event and a celebration of African culture with traditional storytelling, music, dance and performances. Stilt walkers, drums, crafts and face painters will delight the entire family and performances by the Wassalou Band will get people dancing. Commemorative hand-outs will be given while supplies last. Guests will learn about the animals and the design of the exhibit at keeper chats and animal encounters given throughout the day.

All activities are free with Zoo admission.

MEDIA: Media is invited to attend the Ribbon Cutting Ceremony Friday, August 31, 8 a.m. to 9 a.m. Speakers include Jacksonville Mayor's Office Chief of Staff, Brian Hughes, Zoo Executive Director, Tony Vecchio and Zoo Board of Directors Past Chair, Jed Davis. Invitees include donors, VIPs, exhibit designers, JZG Curator of Wildlife Conservation and JZG Professor in Residence and Director of Wildlife Wellness.

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About Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens

For over 100 years, the Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens has aimed to inspire the discovery and appreciation of wildlife through innovative experiences in a caring environment. Starting in 1914 with an animal collection of one red deer fawn, the Zoo now has more than 2,000 rare and exotic animals and 1,000 species of plants, boasting the largest botanical garden in Northeast Florida. **The Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens is a nonprofit organization and a portion of every ticket sold goes to the over 45 conservation initiatives Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens supports around the world, and here in NE Florida.** JZG is proud to be an accredited member of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums. For more information, visit jacksonvillezoo.org