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Un-BEAR-ably Cute Debut at the Zoo

October 5, 2017-- *Jacksonville, FL* – Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens is bear-y excited to announce the debut of Billy, an eight-month-old North American black bear.

Billy was found orphaned in the wild in Immokalee (Collier County), FL, and it appears that well-meaning but uninformed individuals tried to care for him. His affinity to people has made it so that he has been deemed “non-releasable” by wildlife officials.

It is estimated that Billy was born in early February. He currently weighs 60 pounds and stands roughly four feet tall when on his hind legs. He is very energetic and nearly puppy-like in his enthusiasm to greet his keepers.

Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens welcomed a female black bear, Betsy, in October of 2016, to the newly-renovated bear enclosure. The Zoo's Animal Wellness staff recorded that she was particularly interested in canine service animals that are trained at the Zoo in partnership with K9s for Warriors. This led Zoo officials to believe she would be a good candidate for having a companion even though black bears are typically solitary animals.

Billy and Betsy will be introduced over the next week or two, and will hopefully be sharing the exhibit in the near future. The introduction process includes a series of “howdy” encounters through the mesh of their night-house holding areas, which help the bears get to know each other. Keepers will monitor the interest and behavior of the two and when deemed the right time, will do a full introduction.

Until introduced, Billy will have limited time on exhibit each day with no set schedule. He is demonstrating that he is already comfortable in the spacious enclosure and particularly playful with children at the glass viewing window.

Along with being delightful additions to the Zoo, Billy and Betsy are important ambassadors to their species and help define the standards of Living Well With Wildlife, a theme prevalent in the Wild Florida section of the Zoo and Northeast Florida in general.

Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens is working in partnership with other Florida zoos and the FWC to improve bear/human relations by informing the public on the importance of avoiding interactions with wild bears. In addition to testing bear-proof trash cans, zoos

are helping to spread the message that if you encounter a young bear in the wild that appears to be orphaned, call the FWC Hotline at 888-404-FWCC(3922); and do not feed the bear or attempt to care for it. Hand-fed bears may become irreversibly habituated to humans.

Photo and video by Senior Mammal Keeper Lynde Nunn

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.