

Just So... Extraordinary!

By Jennifer McMaster



Photos by
Nick Bonura, Robert
Kemnitz and
Mark Zoeller

*Above, the baby elephant
after his birth. Right, mom
and baby enjoy spending
time in the outdoor yard of
their exhibit.*

Like proud parent, everyone at the Louisville Zoo is eager to share news about the birth of a baby male African elephant, who came into this world on March 18, 2007.

The birth is significant in many ways. First, and most importantly, is the significance of any African elephant birth, considering the endangered status of the species. In the wild, poaching and habitat encroachment have dramatically decreased the natural population of elephants, both African and Asian. Currently, there are approximately 225 African elephants living in North American zoos.

Make that 226.

The second way that the Zoo's elephant birth is significant is that it further demonstrates the viability of artificial insemination



as a means to sustain this population. The successful birth will help galvanize efforts to continue refining the process, from conception to delivery.

The third significance is how smoothly the impregnation, gestation period and labor went, which speaks to the value of long-term, high-quality elephant care and training.

"We've been planning for elephant reproduction since 1994," according to David Campbell, Elephant Supervisor. "We always knew it would take a long time, but

we also knew the results were well worth making sure we did it right."

When it comes to caring for elephants, patience is more than a virtue. It's a necessity.

The baby was born at 8:45 p.m. on March 18, after a 22-month gestation period. His birth weight was 285 pounds, which quickly dropped to about 265 pounds.

"It's typical that an elephant calf will lose nearly 10 percent of its body weight in the first few days of life," Zoo Veterinarian Roy Burns



Zoo Training Supervisor Jane Anne Franklin and Elephant Area Keeper Mark Stocker with the baby just hours after his birth.

(mother Mikki weighs 8,400 pounds) and will reach a shoulder height of about 12 feet.

Training and exercise for Mikki have already returned to the normal regimen. The elephant staff have added wheat bran and rolled oats to the mother's diet to help the baby develop a healthy digestive tract as he nurses. The elephant staff also has begun working with the baby, who, like most young children, has already started to test his boundaries, both with his mother and the keepers.

"We want to make sure from the start that the baby understands his relationship to us and his mother, and that we expect certain behaviors so that we can care for him, like being able to regularly inspect his feet," Campbell explained. "He's just like any child—he thinks the world belongs to him. He wants to try new things, and we want to make sure he does that in a safe way. We're teaching him 'manners.'" Training for these behaviors will help the

keepers ensure that they can care for the baby's health as he develops into a physically and mentally strong full-grown elephant.

Every day the keepers have noticed that the baby is becoming more confident in his movements, and Mikki is becoming more confident as a mom.

There's another significant result that the elephant keepers have seen with the advent of the baby's birth—an overwhelming support system throughout the Zoo and the Louisville community.

"For the first 30 hours, from labor to birth to early feedings, the Zoo director, John Walczak, and our assistant director, Mark Zoeller, along with our veterinary staff and other Zoo staff, provided tremendous support," Campbell said. "For the first few days, we had to make sure that the baby was nursing every two hours. While the elephant staff attended to that, John and Mark mucked the stalls and made sure we had every-

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said. "The weight loss is associated with learning to nurse and drying of the skin as the calf adapts to life in dry air as compared to the moist womb."

This isn't unlike other mammal babies, including humans. But of course, the change sounds a little more notable, since elephants are the largest land animal on the planet.

From birth, the baby is expected to gain about two pounds a day. When he reaches maturity in his 20s, he will outweigh his mother by as much as 5,500 pounds

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thing we needed." In Walczak's mind it is the zoo staff that deserves the credit for this happy success. "I'm continually in awe of the passion and dedication of our staff," Walczak said. The elephant crew essentially rearranged their lives for months culminating in a round-the-clock watch that lasted from March 1 until the end of April. They actually set up



The baby playfully asserts his independence at times but also shares tender moments with mom.

camp in the elephant barn. The vet staff stayed on top of the medical aspects of the situation while other Zoo staff like the Giraffe keepers, stepped up and looked after the camels and rhinos, animals that normally are part of the elephant staff's routine.

Enthusiasm for the baby elephant has reached far beyond Zoo borders.

"The thing that's surprised me most is the incredible outpouring of support and interest from the community," Campbell said.

"I never realized how many people love Mikki, know so much about her and the baby, and especially love having elephants here in Louisville."



Elephant Area Supervisor Dave Campbell reassures Mikki during the birth process.

Check louisvillezoo.org to find the winner of the Elephant Naming Contest presented by Norton Healthcare and to learn the baby's new name.