

News

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PAIR OF RARE BIRDS ON EXHIBIT AT THE SAINT LOUIS ZOO FOR FIRST TIME

If it weren't for zoos, the Micronesian kingfisher would be gone forever. This little bird, once common on the island of Guam, is extinct in the wild. Only 113 individuals are left on the planet – all of them housed in zoos and breeding facilities. For the first time at the Saint Louis Zoo, this very rare bird can be seen at the Bird House.



Like many of the bird species on Guam, the Micronesian kingfisher fell victim to the brown tree snake which was accidentally introduced to the island in the 1940s. By 1981, Micronesian kingfisher numbers had declined to approximately 3,000 birds. When the kingfisher was first designated as “endangered” by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1984, less than 50 kingfishers remained in the wild. Twenty-one birds were then captured and transported to U.S. zoos, as captive breeding programs were considered to be the last hedge against extinction. An additional eight birds were imported to the U.S. in 1986, and the last sighting of a Micronesian kingfisher in the wild occurred in 1988. Today, 113 individuals live in 19 AZA (Association of Zoos and Aquariums) institutions and at the Guam Department of Aquatic and Wildlife Resources breeding facility. The species is managed by an AZA Species Survival Plan.

The Saint Louis Zoo was one of the founding members of the breeding program and has housed Micronesian kingfishers (*Todiramphus cinnamominus cinnamominus*) in an off-display area of the Bird House since 1985. The Zoo has hatched 41 chicks, some of which now live on Guam at the breeding facility. Recent modifications to several Bird House habitats have now made it possible to house a pair of these rare birds for visitors to see. The male and female came to the Saint Louis Zoo from the Brookfield Zoo and Lincoln Park Zoo. The eventual goal of the Species Survival Plan is

to breed enough Micronesian kingfishers to be able to re-introduce them once the snakes have been removed from Guam.

This compact little bird is a riot of colors. Its tail is blue, its wings are a metallic greenish-blue and the rest of the male's body is cinnamon-brown. Females look similar to males, but have pale breast feathers. Their favorite menu items are insects, lizards, crabs and shrimp. Both male and female help build the nest, usually located in a hole in a tree, and after the chicks hatch, both mom and dad bring food to the chicks.

Since 1994, the Saint Louis Zoo has been actively involved in field conservation work on Guam's neighboring islands of Rota, Saipan and Tinian which are at the greatest risk of brown tree snake introduction. The Zoo and other institutions are working to establish captive populations of select bird species, such as the Mariana fruit dove, Saipan bridled white-eye and others, in AZA institutions that can be used as source populations for possible future reintroductions. These institutions are also assisting with veterinary care, education, husbandry training, community education and more.

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