

Blackie's gift: Phoenix Zoo gibbon was ambassador for 40 years

Brooke Bessesen Special to Azcentral.com

March 15, 2002 12:00:00

Last Saturday I lost friend. A good friend, the kind that becomes a facet of your life after many years. His number was 041: The forty-first animal acquired by the zoo back in 1962. But this gibbon, a small member of the primate family, also had a name—Boston Blackie—and last weekend, at a ripe old age, he died of liver failure. Although I received great personal benefits from his friendship, the truth is, he gave a precious gift to everyone living here in the Valley. He gave us his life so that we might learn something of the natural world.

Dust off those old memories, childhood recollections of warm days, wandering through the Phoenix Zoo's magical maze of animals, seeing the diversity of creation all around you. Perhaps you imagined yourself on an African safari or deep in the jungles of another continent, but each trip was an adventure. Along the path, just out into the duck-dappled lake there is a small island with great palm trees, once referred to as "gibbon island," where Blackie grew up. Many children who watched him play, later took their children to see his acrobatics, swinging wildly arm over arm, an action called brachiating, traversing above the rich, green grass of his tropical home, hooting with a voice that could be heard nearly two miles away.

Blackie was a Pileated gibbon (*Hylobates pileatus*), an amazingly human-looking ape native to the rainforests of Southeast Asia. Part of any zoo's mission is to expose people to exotic animals in an effort to educate them on how and why they should be protected. When people see a gibbon like Blackie, they are more interested in helping them as a species, even if it's thousands of miles away in a foreign country. And gibbons need help. They are endangered due to the destruction of their habitat. The devastating onslaught of de-forestation is destroying the world's rainforests.

They are the only apes that routinely walk upright with their arms outstretched for balance, and while gibbons are already relatively small, standing only about 16-36 inches tall and weighing between 10 and 30 pounds, Blackie was especially tiny for an adult male. In captivity, gibbons are only expected to live into their early thirties. I called Blackie "the little man" more out of respect than a commentary on his stature, since he was, in fact, my senior, and at 42 years old carried the unique recognition of being the oldest living gibbon of his species on record.

His life at the Phoenix Zoo was a good one without bars or concrete; nonetheless, Blackie's presence there for us to enjoy was not without sacrifice. Born in Taiwan in 1960, Blackie was wild-caught as baby, probably at the cost of his mother's life. Without a choice, he forwent his freedom to live as an ambassador for his species and provided nearly four decades of education to our community.

Those who paid attention would have seen him with his first mate, then another. He had several offspring, too. Then, in 1994, at age thirty-four, after the death of his second mate, Blackie "retired" from the island to allow a young new family of Siamang gibbons to take a turn at entertaining visitors with their antics.

Blackie came to stay at the Animal Care Center on zoo grounds where I worked as veterinary technician, and this is where our friendship began. He was already elderly and not interested in much. Many keepers and others would come to visit and hold his hand. We loved him there and worked hard to create a stimulating environment, which included music, lollipops and full body massages (he sometimes saved his lollipops to try to trade for more massages as we walked by during our daily chores). Each year the heat of summer drained him a little more, so in 1996, he went to live in Payson with a wonderful woman named Sue Wyckoff, who has spent much of her life helping animals. There he had plenty of space and received lots of attention, all his favorite foods and a very soft pillow to sleep on.

Of course the bond between Blackie and I could not be broken by a mere change of location. I visited often, and whenever time allowed, we would lie together for hours in the warm sun while I'd read my latest book to him aloud or listen to him singing with delight. Eventually he would hug me when I arrived and grin in my face as a friendly gibbon greeting. With more time on this planet than I have yet seen, he revealed tremendous wisdom in his deep brown eyes, which soulfully watched everything from behind softly wrinkled black skin.

The day Blackie passed, he had eaten his breakfast despite showing signs that his liver had finally given out and his little body was failing. I drove up to Payson and Sue and I took him to the Phoenix Zoo where Dr. Kathy Orr, one of the best veterinarians and kindest people I know, took care of him. He seemed pleased to be back on old turf, and we spent some time simply relaxing under a blue sky, listening to the birds, and the sounds of visitors talking and laughing in the distance. It was a beautiful day and he did not suffer, for that we are thankful.

The sight of him swinging through the trees and the sound of his powerful songs are now just a memory—but the gifts—they keep coming. Perhaps gibbons will survive a little longer because a child saw Blackie and cared. That is a gift to all of us. And each and every animal that resides at the Phoenix Zoo or any other for that matter, is giving us something right now, this minute. They give to us their lives, allowing us to observe, learn and care about them in such a special way that it can change the world.

For all of us who knew Blackie, from up close or from the grassy edge of the lake, he will be missed.

Brooke Bessesen is a writer and former staff member of the Phoenix Zoo medical team. For information on gibbons see www.gibboncenter.org and www.phoenixzoo.org.