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The Roar Returns to Audubon Zoo

Audubon joins efforts to help save lions from extinction

The lion population in the wild — more than 450,000 in the 1940s — has dwindled to around 20,000 today. Audubon Zoo is taking a step to reverse this decline with the highly-anticipated opening of its new lion habitat, scheduled for Saturday, May 18.

Working with the Association of Zoos and Aquariums' (AZA) [Species Survival Plan](#) for lions, Audubon recently welcomed four lions with the hope of successful breeding. Nia, Kali, Zuri, and Arnold were chosen to form the Audubon pride based on the best genetic and behavioral matches available to help bolster the lion population in human care.

Arnold, who came to Audubon from Wildlife Safari in Winston, Oregon, arrived in February and females Nia, Kali, and Zuri, who came from the Peoria Zoo in Peoria, Illinois, arrived in March.

They are spending time out of public view while they adjust to their new environment and bond as a social group.

"Lion introductions take quite a bit of time," said Vice President and Audubon Zoo General Curator Joel Hamilton. "We are making sure the lions form a cohesive pride under the care of our expert animal team."

Visitors and New Orleanians living near Audubon Zoo will likely hear resounding roars from the new residents. It's also possible that guests may be able to catch a glimpse of the new residents in their behind-the-scenes enclosure before they make their public debut.

For the wellbeing of the lions, Audubon asks Zoo guests to respect their privacy and all barriers and signs restricting public access to the habitat area.

Lions were Audubon Zoo favorites for many years. Audubon is proud to be able to welcome them back thanks to a generous \$5 million dollar donation from philanthropists Joy and Boysie Bollinger, which funded the design and construction of the new lion exhibit. The [\\$5 million donation](#) is the largest single gift Audubon Zoo has ever received from a private individual or family.

"Our travels to Africa over the years have taught us the true beauty of nature," said Boysie Bollinger. "We are so pleased to be able to bring this experience to the children of New Orleans and to educate a new generation about this important species."

The new lion habitat is located in Audubon Zoo's popular African Savanna exhibit, which opened in the 1980s. The [new exhibit's focal point](#) is a replica of an abandoned 1920s-era train station — a symbol of the transportation system that once spanned lion country and, tragically, opened the door to habitat loss, poaching, and the devastation of Africa's vast natural resources.

Mock train cars have been repurposed into conservation and research stations where Zoo staff will offer animal care and education demonstrations. The design gives panoramic views of the habitat along with places for up-close glimpses of the majestic animals. The new habitat has been constructed to accommodate multiple lions.

Lions are classified from threatened to critically endangered. Audubon, along with fellow [AZA institutions](#), is partnering with organizations in Africa to mitigate conflict between farmers and lions, increase monitoring of the lion population's numbers and distribution, and address habitat loss.

"We are excited to share current and future successes in lion conservation with our guests," said Hamilton. "Lions face a number of threats in the wild, and our hope is to teach our visitors that people can coexist with these precious carnivores."

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