



Audubon Zoo
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Audubon Zoo Partners in Largest Release of Rarest Snake in the United States

(New Orleans, La.) – On June 4, 2020, 41 Louisiana pine snakes were released into the wild, marking the largest release to date of the United States' rarest snake species, thanks to conservation partners from around the country. Representatives from Audubon Zoo, Memphis Zoo, and the U.S. Forestry Service released the zoo-hatched snakes into the Kisatchie National Forest.

"This is a collaborative effort to restore wild populations of the Louisiana pine snake, which has been in decline for many decades," said Audubon Zoo's Curator of Herpetology Robert Mendyk. "Seven of the released snakes were hatched right here at Audubon Zoo in 2018. Others were hatched at Memphis Zoo and the Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens."

An additional 14 Louisiana pine snakes hatched at Audubon Zoo, Fort Worth Zoo, and Memphis Zoo will be released in the coming weeks and will bring the total number of individuals released to 178 snakes since the start of the project in 2010.

Before the snakes were released, staff measured, weighed, and took photographs and notes on each individual's body condition and any unique identifiable features. The snakes are equipped with microchips that store identifiable information, which enables USFS biologists to track their movements and survivorship over time. These microchips are checked one last time before the snakes are released down stump holes or the burrows of pocket gophers, a primary food source of the species.

With very few individuals thought to be left in the wild, Louisiana pine snakes (*Pituophis ruthveni*) are listed as [endangered by the IUCN](#). Historically restricted to longleaf pine habitats of western Louisiana and eastern Texas, the Louisiana pine snake is now considered to be the rarest snake in the United States. Its disappearance has been due largely to habitat loss associated with poor land management practices including fire suppression and large-scale timber production. Today, the species is found on only a handful of fragmented parcels of land.

Audubon Zoo is one of only four AZA-accredited zoological parks—and the only facility in Louisiana—that maintain an assurance colony of the Louisiana pine snake to help safeguard it from extinction. At Audubon, this species is bred annually by the Zoo's herpetology department, with some of the offspring then raised at Audubon to larger sizes that are less vulnerable to predation before they are released to the wild. Others are transferred to partnering zoos to become future contributors to the conservation breeding program.

"The Louisiana pine snake is a wonderful example of how visiting AZA-accredited zoos directly supports wildlife," said Audubon Nature Institute President and CEO Ron Forman. "When you purchase a ticket to Audubon Zoo, you are making a positive impact on our natural world, saving species from extinction across the globe and right here in our own local ecosystem."

In AZA-accredited zoos, the Louisiana pine snake has been managed by a [Species Survival Plan](#), of which Audubon Zoo is an original member, since 2000. The Species Survival Plan was created to oversee the assurance colony of this species in zoos and ensure that all planned breeding maximizes genetic diversity in the population. Audubon Zoo has successfully hatched 113 Louisiana pine snakes to date, 21 of which have been released to the wild since 2010. Audubon Zoo and the U.S. Forestry Service also released three Louisiana pine snakes into the Kisatchie National Forest on [September 19, 2019](#).

The Louisiana Pine Snake Reintroduction Program exemplifies a successful collaborative conservation project that calls upon the expertise of many individuals from various zoos and wildlife agencies including the U.S. Forestry Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Memphis Zoo, Fort Worth Zoo, Ellen Trout Zoo, Audubon Zoo, Phoenix Zoo, and the Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens.

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