

## Bringing Up Baby

By Brooke Wardrop; Special to the TAB  
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Pottos play a very important role in the African rainforest. Everything within the ecosystem is interconnected. Pottos integrate, as do all species, into the natural environment and provide balance. Zoo New England has been working successfully to build the captive population of pottos, because the species has been on the decline for years. According to Zoo New England President and CEO John Linehan, "There isn't even a good handle on how many there are in the wild because pottos are so secretive."

The animal care and veterinary staffs always prefer to have baby animals raised by their mothers, as they would be in the wild. However, after Tallensi, a 25-year-old potto with a history of not caring for her young, ignored her infant born on September 9, 2007, the staff had to step in to help ensure the baby's survival.

The baby potto is the offspring of Tallensi and 19-year-old Rendille, and was cared for by Zoo staff off-exhibit, marking the third time a potto has been successfully hand-reared at Franklin Park Zoo. The potto, which was born with large round eyes and strong, tiny fingers, weighed a mere 26 grams at birth – about the size of a small mouse.

Pottos are small primates native to the forests and wooded savannahs of West Africa and Central Africa. These nocturnal animals covered with dark brownish fur are slow-moving, well-camouflaged and are found in the forest canopy. When confronted by a predator, these animals deploy a defensive posture by clamping down on a branch and presenting their neck and upper back, which has extra layers of skin and elongated spines on the vertebrae. This thickened area, sometimes called a shield, helps protect the potto if attacked.

Pottos, whose body-lengths measure between 12 to 15 inches long, give birth to one to two offspring. Full-grown pottos weigh just less than 3 pounds.

The infant potto at Franklin Park Zoo would not have survived if not for the attentive care of Zoo staff who carefully fed the baby formula out of a small eyedropper every two to three hours throughout its first two weeks of life.

Following the birth, Zoo staff waited nearly five hours for Tallensi to show interest in the infant before deciding to step in.

In regards to hand-rearing, the Zoo staff adheres to strict protocols. The vets checked the baby every day for the first month of its life. These animals are sensitive to



A 3.5 week old baby potto.  
photo courtesy of Christina DeMetrio, Zoo New England

infection. Zoo staff took precautions with the potto's health by always wearing a surgical mask and gloves when handling the infant.

Between weeks two and five of the young potto's life, zookeepers gradually reduced and spaced out the number of daily feedings. Plain yogurt and mashed bananas were gradually introduced to the baby's diet. Around day 50, staff began feeding the small primate about four times a day and foods such as diced apples and mashed cooked sweet potatoes were added to the baby's diet. At about 120 days old, the potto, which was nearly full grown, began eating an adult diet.

The birth of the potto gave a boost to the tiny North American captive population. Franklin Park Zoo is one of three zoos in the country to exhibit pottos, and one of the only zoos that has been adding to the captive population. Tallensi is the oldest potto in the North American captive population and the oldest to give birth.

The pottos, which are classified as lower risk/least concern by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), were bred as part of the Potto Population Management Plan (PMP). PMPs provide nationally-coordinated population management recommendations for zoo and aquarium species. The Potto PMP was started by a former Zoo New England zookeeper in the mid-1990s. In 2001, Zoo staff successfully hand-raised their first potto at Franklin Park Zoo. A second potto was also successfully hand-raised in 2006.

In addition to the baby born last fall, Franklin Park Zoo also has two adult male and two adult female pottos. The pottos are exhibited inside the Tropical Forest.

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