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Emi, a Sumatran rhinoceros at the Cincinnati Zoo, is pregnant. The last time a Sumatran rhino was bred and born in captivity was 1889 in Calcutta

Rhino's pregnancy a first at any zoo in 108 years

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CINCINNATI — Emi, the Cincinnati Zoo's 7-year-old Sumatran rhinoceros, is pregnant — apparently the first confirmed pregnancy of a captive member of the species in 108 years.

The pregnancy is "the most significant breeding of any large mammal in our century," said zoo director Ed Maruska.

The zoo has been involved in the breeding program since Maruska began negotiations to bring the rhinos here in the 1980s.

An estimated 200 to 400 of the animals are left in the wilds of Burma, Malaysia, Borneo and Sumatra.

There are 18 in captivity — 15 in Asia and three in Cincinnati.

The last recorded pregnancy of a Sumatran rhinoceros in captivity was at the Calcutta Zoo in 1889, experts said.

Emi's estimated due date is January or February 1999, after a 15- to 16-month gestation. The calf's weight at birth could be 30 to 40 pounds, the zoo estimates.

Ipuh, another of the zoo's rhinos, is the father. He was caught in the wild and his age is unknown.

Sumatrans are small rhinos, 5 feet tall at the shoulder and weighing 1,600 to 2,000 pounds. In contrast, the white rhino is about 6 feet and 5,000 pounds.

Sumatrans are the only species of rhino with hair — stiff, reddish-colored hair that is particularly dense along the back and on the ears. They have two short horns.

Emi's pregnancy is important for two reasons:

The animal's march toward extinction is accelerating — the population has declined 50 percent since 1987. The Sumatran is crucially endangered, Maruska said, because of habitat loss and poaching. Their horns bring more on the black market than gold, he said. Asians believe the horns have medicinal properties.

The rain forests where the wild Sumatrans live are disappearing, primarily because of logging.

Conservationists think a captive breeding program is the only hope for saving the species. Mike Dee, mammal curator at the Los Angeles Zoo, which lent Emi to the Cincinnati zoo, said, "Emi is the last hope."

Emi's pregnancy came about

the old-fashioned way, but it had help.

Sumatran rhinos lead such solitary lives that they come together only when the female is in heat. Encounters at any other time end in vicious fights and severe injuries to one or both of the animals.

The problem facing the Cincinnati zoo was how to tell when the female was in heat. A team of zoo staffers solved the problem.

Since February, Dr. Terri Roth, director of the zoo's Center for Research of Endangered Wildlife, has performed ultrasound three to seven times a week to visualize Emi's ovaries. By doing so, she watched as follicles grew and ovulated. That enabled her to plot the reproductive cycle.

It paid off Sept. 17, when Emi and Ipuh had a 35-minute breeding session. The pregnancy was confirmed Oct. 1 by ultrasound and reconfirmed Oct. 13 when a fetal heartbeat was detected.

Besides increasing the population, the pregnancy is important because of the knowledge to be gathered. Researchers know little about the Sumatran rhino. Emi's gestation period is no more than an educated guess.

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