



Shots to the Paws: Detroit Zoo to Vaccinate Some Animals Against COVID

Lions, tigers, chimpanzees, and gorillas — the critters that are believed to be at risk of getting COVID-19 — will be administered their shots at the Detroit Zoo in Michigan.

Joining more than five million fully vaccinated human Michiganders, some zoo critters are starting to receive a COVID vaccine created for veterinary use, the Detroit Zoological Society (DZS) announced in a [statement](#) on Monday. Scott Carter, chief life sciences officer for the DZS, noted:

The animals routinely get other vaccinations. Many of the mammals are trained to present themselves to our animal care staff for minor medical procedures, including vaccinations. We're both thankful and relieved a special vaccine is now available to protect against COVID-19.



RedGazelle123/Wikimedia Commons
Gorilla at Detroit Zoo

Ann Duncan, director of animal health for the Detroit Zoological Society, said in a statement that zoo critters need this type of protection much like pet dogs need — and receive — their protection against parvovirus, distemper, or rabies.

Officials mentioned there were no COVID animal cases registered at the zoo, but noted several lions, tigers, leopards, and gorillas have contracted COVID in other American zoos. “A tiger and a lion,” it is said, died of COVID in European and Indian zoos, implying the possibility of a tragic outcome is real. The zoo indicated it has employed COVID safety protocols, including full Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) for staff and public barriers to ensure social distancing between the guests and animals.

The vaccine that is given to animals is said to be developed by Michigan-based veterinary pharmaceutical company Zoetis, which has been authorized on a case-by-case basis by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Zoetis, the world’s largest producer of medicine and vaccinations for pets and livestock, was part of Pfizer until it [spun off](#) in 2013.

The COVID vaccine rollout for zoo animals began in February 2021, when four orangutans and five bonobos at San Diego Zoo Safari Park got their jabs, per [National Geographic](#). The decision to vaccinate animals came in the wake of eight gorillas at the zoo becoming the first great apes in the world to test positive for COVID in January 2021.

The magazine reports that globally, infections have been confirmed in tigers, lions, mink, snow leopards, cougars, a ferret, dogs, and domestic cats. The newly uncovered fact that great apes were also susceptible to SARS-CoV-2 has been especially alarming, since some of the species are considered



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endangered. For example, it is reported there are just 5,000 gorillas left in the wild, and since they live in close family groups, infection may spread easily between them. The magazine also noted at the time that despite more than a year having passed since the beginning of the pandemic, data on the virus's mechanism of affecting the animals is very limited, and researchers only rely on what is already known from the sporadic outbreaks in a handful of species.

The story of great apes in San Diego receiving their COVID shots sparked interest in other zoos, which in turn shaped Zoetis's plan to donate 11,000 doses of the animal vaccine to more than 80 institutions in 27 states, [per](#) Mahesh Kumar, senior vice president of global biologics at Zoetis. *National Geographic* calls the donation "a promising development for zoo animals, which are at risk of the disease because of their proximity to humans."

Still, there are great many unknowns, the magazine notes:

How effective will the vaccines be? Will they protect animals against the Delta variant? Will the rollout be complicated by anti-vaxxers' loud objections? And will pets ever need to be vaccinated? The scientists and institutions at the heart of the animal vaccine rollout hope to find answers in the coming months.

It appears surprising that, while noting how precarious some species are, the zoos are willing to take the risk of giving them a jab for which efficacy and long-term side-effects on them or their offspring are still to be studied.

Nadine Lamberski, chief conservation and wildlife health officer at the San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance, said, [per](#) National Geographic, that since the virus "originated in animals and spread to people ... it can be spread back to animals." Lamberski's colleague from the Oakland zoo, Alex Herman, said even though their zoo has not had any COVID cases among critters and all their staff is vaccinated, he still "knew" the animals were at risk, especially since Delta arrived. Therefore, he welcomed the idea of animals being vaccinated.

Last November, the Danish government [ordered](#) the culling of roughly 17 million mink because of COVID outbreaks at 289 mink farms. Since a few thousand mink escape Danish farms each year, some infected critters could have potentially ventured into the wild and passed the virus to other animals, it was feared.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) [states](#) that a small number of pets worldwide, including cats and dogs, have been reported to be infected with the virus that causes COVID-19, mostly after close contact with sick people. The risk of animals spreading COVID to people is considered to be low, but since people can spread the disease to animals, CDC says infected people should take the same precautions around pets as they would around people. The CDC does not mention any COVID vaccination for pets.

The World Small Animal Veterinary Association is [not recommending](#) vaccinating cats and dogs against COVID, observing that they, generally, develop "mild, self-limited clinical signs [of infection]," and no cat or dog is known to have died from COVID, therefore, "the need for a vaccine to lessen clinical signs of COVID-19 in dogs and cats is questionable."



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