

Cheetah, chimp from Tarzan films, dies

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(CNN) -- Condolences poured in to a Florida primate sanctuary Wednesday after it announced the death of Cheetah, a chimpanzee that the sanctuary said starred in the Tarzan movies during the 1930s.

"I grew up watching Tarzan and Cheetah from a boy," a man identifying himself as Thomas from England wrote on the Suncoast Primate Sanctuary's website. "God bless you Cheetah. Now you and Tarzan are together again."

Johnny Weissmuller and Maureen O'Sullivan hold hands with Cheetah the chimpanzee in "Tarzan and His Mate."

The chimpanzee died Saturday after suffering kidney failure the week before, the sanctuary foundation said on the site. He was roughly 80 years old, Debbie Cobb, the sanctuary's outreach director, told CNN affiliate WFLA.

Cobb recalled Cheetah as an outgoing chimp who loved finger painting and watching football and who was soothed by Christian music, the station said.

Several chimpanzees appeared in various Tarzan movies, many of which were popular in the 1930s and 1940s. The Florida primate sanctuary said its chimp appeared in the Tarzan movies from 1932 through 1934, according to WFLA.

According to the website Tarzanmovieguide.com, "Tarzan the Ape Man" was released in 1932 and "Tarzan and his Mate" in 1934. Both movies starred Johnny Weissmuller as Tarzan. Weissmuller was the first speaking Tarzan, according to the Internet Movie Database website. He died in 1984.

Weissmuller appeared in Tarzan movies through 1948, according to the online movie guide site, with other chimpanzees appearing in the role of Cheetah.

Cheetah came to the primate sanctuary from Weissmuller's Florida estate around 1960, Cobb told WFLA. He was the most famous of the sanctuary's 15 chimpanzees.

"He was very compassionate," Cobb said. "He could tell if I was having a good day or a bad day. He was always trying to get me to laugh if he thought I was having a bad day. He was very in tune to human feelings."

Cheetah was known for his ability to stand up and walk like a person, sanctuary volunteer Ron Priest told WFLA.

Another distinguishing characteristic: "When he didn't like somebody or something that was going on, he would pick up some poop and throw it at them," Priest said. "He could get you at 30 feet with bars in between."

Still, Cobb told the station, "He wasn't a chimp that caused a lot of problems."

Cheetah is not believed to have any children, Priest said.

His age was advanced for a chimpanzee, Cobb told WFLA. In the wild, the average chimp survives 25 to 35 years, she said, and they can live 35 to 45 years in zoos.

Another chimpanzee named Cheeta lives on a primate sanctuary in Southern California named C.H.E.E.T.A (Creative Habitats and Enrichment for Endangered and Threatened Apes). The sanctuary's creator, Dan Westfall, said on its web site that he was saddened to hear of Cheetah's passing in Florida. He said he and others at the sanctuary "send our deepest sympathies to our colleagues at Suncoast."

Westfall writes on the site that he was told Cheeta was one of the original chimps in the Tarzan movies during the 1930s and 1940s. However, when he began working with a writer on Cheeta's biography, research revealed "that our Cheeta is unlikely to be as old as we'd thought, although he is clearly old," Westfall wrote. "It is also difficult to determine which movies, if any, our Cheeta may have been in."

People from several countries offered condolences for Cheetah on the Florida sanctuary's site in several different languages. A few credited him with helping them develop a love for animals.

"Cheetah will remain forever remembered in history," someone in Malta wrote.

"This little man was almost human," another poster wrote. "Some of the antics he got up to used to make me laugh when I was in my teens many years ago. Thanks Cheetah for all the good times you had and made us all laugh. You will be a star that will be always remembered. I am in my 60s now and grew up with you."