

# Home away from home: Orphaned Mission Valley grizzlies thriving at Maryland Zoo



Nita, left, and Nova recently dug dens at The Maryland Zoo and are resting for the season. (Courtesy of The Maryland Zoo)

Grizzly cubs Nita (left) and Nova settle into their new home at The Maryland Zoo in this 2017 file photo. (Courtesy of The Maryland Zoo)

"Nita seems to be happy with everything the keepers offer her," zoo officials said. (Courtesy of The Maryland Zoo)

Zoo keepers report Nova solves puzzles and learns new skills quickly. (Courtesy of The Maryland Zoo)

By  
**SCOT HEISEL**

Lake County Leader

|  
December 30, 2021 12:45 AM

@media (max-width: 767.98px){ .d-mobile-block { display: block !important; } }

A pair of grizzly cubs found starving near St. Ignatius in 2016 have adapted well to their new home at The Maryland Zoo in Baltimore, according to their caretakers.

The female siblings — Nova and Nita — were relocated to the zoo five years ago this month, when they became the first grizzly bears at The Maryland Zoo in its 140-year history.

"Keepers note that they engage in training and enrichment opportunities whenever they are offered," Margaret Innes, assistant general curator for the zoo's Animal Department, said in an email last week. "Nova in particular keeps us on our toes. We constantly have to come up with new enrichment and training ideas because of how quickly she solves puzzles and learns new skills, whereas Nita seems to be happy with everything the keepers offer her."

All told, it's been a decent outcome for the sisters, who experienced a lot of trauma as young cubs.

After they were originally discovered in September of 2016, orphaned and starving, wildlife biologists with the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes decided to mount a rescue.

Their mother was found later with severe shotgun wounds to her face and was euthanized.

The cubs were taken to the Montana Wildlife Center in Helena, where Nita was treated for a bullet wound in her side. While the bears were nursed back to full health, officials determined they were too young to be released into the wild, and they were sent to Maryland following a

nationwide search for a new home.

“Obviously they had a pretty traumatic beginning to life,” Erin Cantwell, the zoo’s mammal collection manager, said in a 2017 Leader article. “But, because they had each other, they tolerated the changes much better than I expected.”

The Leader contacted The Maryland Zoo recently, and the following is a Q&A with Assistant General Curator Margaret Innes.

#### **How have Nita and Nova acclimated to their home at the zoo?**

“After they arrived, Nita and Nova underwent a quarantine period that gave them time to adjust to their new surroundings before being introduced to the public. We used this time to make alterations to the habitat to withstand their destructive tendencies, which was just as well, since from the start they wanted to explore every nook and cranny, which included a lot of digging. This year they even dug their own den in the habitat. Keepers note that they engage in training and enrichment opportunities whenever they are offered. Nova in particular keeps us on our toes. We constantly have to come up with new enrichment and training ideas because of how quickly she solves puzzles and learns new skills, whereas Nita seems to be happy with everything the keepers offer her.”

#### **Are they a popular attraction for the zoo?**

“They definitely are. Although they’re older now, they can still be quite active, and guests love to watch their antics when they engage with their enrichment or cool off in the pool. Guests enjoy learning about their story and how they came to Maryland from Montana. It creates a real connection for our guests.”

#### **Who are their regular keepers?**

“They are cared for by a team of six very dedicated keepers, who also care for the animals in the African Watering Hole. The keepers spend the majority of their time focusing on training behaviors like voluntary injection training or presenting body parts (this allows the bears to participate in their own medical care, and is an important part of their management), and on creating novel enrichment opportunities to challenge the bears physically and mentally.”

#### **What foods make up their diet?**

“Since they are omnivores, they eat a wide variety of foods, and it varies seasonally. In the spring, they eat mostly greens and veggies. Their summer diet includes meat and prey items as well as more produce. Then, as they are beginning to bulk up for the winter period, the diet switches to large volumes of chow and fats. During their winter period their appetites are greatly reduced, but they constantly have access to chow that they can eat at their leisure. For training, keepers use favorite items like honey and lard. We also have a carcass feeding program at the zoo, and periodically they are given large pieces of carcass to consume.

#### **When did they go into hibernation, and how long are they expected to stay hunkered down?**

By early November we started seeing signs that they were getting ready to hibernate. This included a reduced appetite, less activity and less engagement with the keepers. By mid-November they moved into their winter dens, and immediately began to sleep for long periods every day. Now they are asleep most of the time, only waking up occasionally to eat a small amount of food.

#### **Anything else?**

Accompanying the grizzly bears on their journey from Montana was a 1-year-old badger that had been rescued as an orphan. The badger, Makoda, is now one of the zoo’s animal ambassadors and plays an important role in educating the public about our native species.

#### **About The Maryland Zoo in Baltimore**

Founded in 1876, The Maryland Zoo in Baltimore is the third oldest zoo in the United States and is internationally known for its contributions in conservation and research. More than 1,500 animals are represented in the zoo’s varied natural habitat exhibits in areas such as the award-winning Penguin Coast, Polar Bear Watch, the Maryland Wilderness, African Journey and the Children’s Zoo. Situated in Druid Hill Park near Downtown Baltimore, the zoo is accredited by the Association of Zoos & Aquariums. For more information, visit

[www.marylandzoo.org](http://www.marylandzoo.org)

or visit them on

[Facebook](#)

, Instagram, and Twitter (

[@MarylandZoo](#)

), and YouTube (@MarylandZooTV).



Zoo keepers report Nova solves puzzles and learns new skills quickly. (Courtesy of The Maryland Zoo)



"Nita seems to be happy with everything the keepers offer her," zoo officials said. (Courtesy of The Maryland Zoo)



Grizzly cubs Nita (left) and Nova settle into their new home at The Maryland Zoo in this 2017 file photo. (Courtesy of The Maryland Zoo)

---

## Recent Headlines

---