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The Boston Globe

Young reindeer dies at Stone Zoo





Noelle, 1 1/2 years old, is suspected to have died of a rare blood parasite. This photo is from December. (The Stone Zoo)

By [Matt Rocheleau](#)
Globe Correspondent / October 23, 2010

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A female reindeer who enchanted visitors at the Stone Zoo in Stoneham has died of what officials believe to be a rare disease passed by ticks.

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Noelle, who died Wednesday at age 1 1/2, was one of two reindeer from a Minnesota farm that arrived just before Thanksgiving last year at the zoo, which is part of Zoo New England. She, along with her male companion Cornelius, was named by zoo guests and by [Boston.com](#) readers during the 2009 holiday season.

The duo were the first new reindeer at the zoo in 12 years.

“She, in particular, was really a very sweet animal,” John Linehan, Zoo New England president and chief executive, said yesterday by phone. “We could take her out and have her interact with the public in a safe way.”


Linehan said Noelle’s death was very sudden and a “devastating loss” for the zoo and its visitors, who would often get a chance to pet, take pictures with, and feed Noelle, who was calmer and gentler around people than most reindeer.

After shedding her first set of 14-inch-long antlers last winter, Noelle’s second set had grown to an impressive size, nearly 3 feet, Linehan said. Despite her young age, Noelle was considered to be an adult and in the prime of life.


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no brain-er (*noh brān er*) *adj.*

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The zoo's veterinary staff believes that Noelle had a blood parasite rare to the area called Babesia odocoilei, which is passed by ticks, though further laboratory tests are needed to confirm that. The disease can remain dormant in an animal and undetectable in blood tests, the zoo said.

Once symptoms begin to show, the disease's progression is often too rapid for even immediate treatment to reverse the process.

Noelle was lethargic and lying down Wednesday morning, which alerted zoo staff to have her examined, Linehan said. Veterinarian Susan Bartlett, who had studied and published a paper on the particular parasitic disease, quickly recognized Noelle's symptoms and began treatment, but Noelle succumbed by early Wednesday evening.

"This reindeer's decline was so precipitous that even appropriate immediate treatments could not reverse the process," Eric Baitchman, the zoo's veterinary services director, said in a statement from the zoo. "There was no better veterinarian this animal could have had than Dr. Bartlett."

The zoo's staff will closely monitor the remaining two reindeer, Cornelius and a 13-year-old female named Linnae, who have each been given preventive treatment. The disease suspected to have killed Noelle is not a risk to humans.

Matt Rocheleau can be reached at mjrochele@gmail.com. ■

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