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## Giant anteater Jockamo to make public debut Saturday at Boston zoo

Posted by Matt Rocheleau April 1, 2011 05:51 PM

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(Courtesy: Zoo New England, Christina Demetrio)

Jockamo the giant anteater at his new home in Franklin Park Zoo.

By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

Bugs are not considered by most to be an ideal meal. But, Jockamo can wolf them down like an endless buffet.

The one-and-a-half year old, 112-pound giant anteater will make his zoo debut in Boston Saturday – the first giant anteater Zoo New England has ever exhibited.

“They’re really a fun species to work with,” said Nikki Smith, lead keeper of

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the Franklin Park Zoo's Tropical Forest where Jockamo has been staying out of public view since he arrived from Louisiana several months ago.

"There's not a ton of these guys in captivity," she said, adding that while not endangered, the largest known anteater species is classified as "vulnerable."

While waiting patiently for his glass-enclosed exhibit to be completed, the giant anteater has been digging around his new home, ripping open dead logs and even swimming, Smith said. He's playful about sprayed from a hose by his keepers, adventurously crawls through corrugated tubes and "gets a total kick" out of tearing cardboard boxes to bits.

With a sticky, two-foot long tongue he can extend out his foot-and-a half long, tube-like head, Jockamo can eat up to 1,000 insects within a matter of minutes and up to 30,000 ants and termites in one day, according to the zoo.

But, Smith doesn't recommend attempting to bring home a giant anteater in lieu of calling an exterminator: "It would probably do some heavy damage to your walls to get at those termites."

And, giant anteaters have a more diverse palette than their name suggests. Jockamo, for instance, enjoys other insects, including crickets, mealworms, waxworms, as well as avocados, bananas and yogurt, she said.

A giant anteater's diet in the wild would be restricted primarily to a heavy dose of ants and termites. In order to get around, the mammal's poor eyesight causes it to rely on the Toucan Sam-like approach of "follow your nose." While its scent-catching capabilities are strong and it can move at a quick pace, giant anteaters are believed to mostly eat ants because they're an easy and reliable meal, said Smith.

"Ants are a giant source of food that doesn't move," she said. "Because ants stay in a large colony and don't move, [anteaters] have kind of specialized in eating them."

The four claws on Jockamo's forefeet are so long – about three to four inches – that he has to walk on his knuckles to keep them out of his own way, zoo officials said. But, the claws also allow him to pry open ant and termite mounds while also providing enough precision to not completely destroy the insect lair. Keeping the ant home somewhat intact means the bugs will rebuild and Jockamo will eventually swing by for another snack.

"It's like having a favorite restaurant that you keep going back to," said Smith.

But in captivity keeping up with that buggy demand is a challenge. So, instead of thousands of ants and termites daily, anteaters are often nourished with a chow, similar to what felines are fed except with loads of added fiber to mimic their natural diet. Jockamo typically guzzles down six cups worth of the chow that is made into small bead-size pellets he can slurp into his narrow mouth.

To highlight how giant anteaters eat, a special feeding tube will be presented periodically at the exhibit. The feeding tube is designed to give zoo guests a view of the animal's lengthy tongue as it hastily devours insects. While the tube is not a permanent fixture of the exhibit, the zoo's staff said they plans to present it to the anteater during scheduled zookeeper encounters.

Giant anteaters are the largest of four anteater species and the only that is considered to be an on-the-ground-only animal, as opposed to the climbing-and-hanging-in-the-trees type.

The giant anteater can grow up to 140 pounds and to a length of six to eight

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Analysis of recent census data: JP's Hispanic, black

feet, with about half the distance covered by their tail, the zoo said. Covered in bushy, thick, coarse hairs that can reach nearly 16 inches in length, their tails are often used to fully cover themselves while they sleep serving as part blanket, part shelter and part disguise.

In the wild, the distinctly-colored species can live up to around 15 years; in captivity their lifespan can extend to around 25 years, said Smith. Besides while mating or while raising baby giant anteaters, the species live on their own.

Giant anteaters live in moist tropical forests, dry deciduous forests, as well as swamp, savannah and grassland habitats, the zoo said. Their historic range is from the southern tip of Mexico down to Honduras and through South America.

E-mail Matt Rocheleau at [mjrochele@gmail.com](mailto:mjrochele@gmail.com).



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