

Reggie, the 'A-list' alligator, will see you later at the L.A. Zoo

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GRIFFITH PARK - He's the top of L.A.'s A-list, the latest in L.A. cool and the baddest boy in the biz.

Reggie the alligator was pressed by paparazzi and crowds Thursday during his first public appearance at the Los Angeles Zoo.

"Reggie! Reggie! Reggie!" chanted a throng of children, parents and hipsters hoping for a glimpse of the gator known 'round the world for his smooth quick getaways.

Reggie, a one-time fugitive of Lake Machado in Harbor City, had just spent three months in seclusion dieting on a mere three pounds a week of quail, rats and other morsels.

Now he is ready for a new zoo reality show.

And for a role as L.A.'s mascot.

"Reggie should be L.A.'s official mascot," declared Councilwoman Janice Hahn, the agent who'd pushed for Reggie's top billing at the L.A. Zoo.

"He's cute. He never disappoints. When he looks you in the eye, you know you've got a friend."

By now, the rise to fame of the 7-foot, 114-pound American alligator has become inscribed in L.A. legend.

How the reptile common to southern bayous was spotted in August 2005 incongruously gliding through 26 acres of floating primrose at Lake Machado in Harbor Regional Park.

How the alligator, first dubbed "Harbor City Harry" evaded the grasp of city herpetologists, firefighters, parks and zoo officials.

How he slipped under the noses of reptile wranglers from Colorado to Gatorland, Fla.

How Australia's renowned Crocodile Hunter Steve Irwin had even vowed to catch him before his sudden death last year.

Reggie became a reptilian sensation for his Steve McQueen-style hijinx and Houdini disappearances. Harbor City was abuzz. And soon the world fell in love with L.A.'s fugitive reptile.

Reggie, it turned out, had been the pet name given by two men who had dumped him into Lake Machado at a cost of \$200,000 to the city, Hahn said.

Anthony Brewer, 38, pleaded no contest to misdemeanor dumping charges and has paid \$100,000 in restitution. Former LAPD Officer Todd Natow, 44, has pleaded not guilty and awaits trial.

Last April, after 21 months on the lam, Reggie was seen sunning himself on the southern shore, with a partially eaten chicken leg.

That's when parks and zoo officials sprang into action, setting up a quick corral.

"I came inside the gate, held his mouth and taped it," said Fred Dowell, a 6-foot-3, 245-pound caretaker for the Department of Recreation and Parks. "Watching a few Crocodile Hunter specials taught me what to do."

On Thursday, city workers slowly carried Reggie toward the waiting crowd, his pond glistening, his waterfall gurgling softly beneath a giant ficus tree.

They untaped Reggie's snout. Unwrapped his pearly teeth. Gently set him down. And let him eagerly slither into his deluxe bath.

The pond, not far from the zoo gate, was once home to other zoo alligators with a fondness for nabbing squirrels.

Giddy onlookers rushed the fence to see the scaly green alligator stare straight into the cameras.

"Wow," said 4-year-old Victor Munguia of Los Angeles.

"That's him!" said one young man with hip tattoos.

"He's swimming, he's doing the breast stroke, he's doing the gator crawl," exclaimed Hahn, breaking into a rocking rendition of "See you later alligator."

Hahn announced the city would give 100 free zoo tickets to the residents of Harbor City.

Zoo officials said they want to use Reggie as a lesson on how not to dump exotic pets into local ecosystems.

And most everyone saw Reggie as the city's premier mascot.

"He's already the Harbor City mascot, so of course he's L.A.'s mascot," said Joeann Valle, executive director of the Harbor City/Harbor Gateway Chamber of Commerce. "We'll share him with the whole city because he's so wonderful."

"I believe that Reggie is definitely the L.A. Cool," said Jennifer Mera, 19, of Gardena, who'd headed to the zoo with her family for Reggie's coming out party.

"People will come from far away just to see him. This is more (cool) than Paris Hilton or any other celebrity. I would rather come over here to see Reggie than David Beckham.

"I'm glad they were finally able to capture him."

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