

**Minnesota Zoo, John Ball Zoo, and Assiniboine Park Conservancy Receive AZA North America Conservation Award for Poweshiek Skipperling Recovery Efforts**

Apple Valley, MN | Grand Rapids, MI | Winnipeg, MB (September 25, 2025) – The **Association of Zoos and Aquariums** (AZA) has recognized the **Minnesota Zoo**, **John Ball Zoo**, and **Assiniboine Park Conservancy** with top honors for the **2025 North American Conservation Award** for their groundbreaking and collaborative work to save the **critically endangered Poweshiek skipperling butterfly**.

The Poweshiek skipperling has become one of the world’s most endangered butterflies, and urgent conservation efforts are essential to ensure its survival. Once one of the most common butterflies across central U.S. and Canadian tallgrass prairies, the Poweshiek skipperling declined steeply over the past two decades due to loss of prairie and habitat quality. It has now disappeared from almost everywhere it once called home.

This “Most Minnesotan butterfly” was last seen in Minnesota in 2007 and is now only known to be hanging on in a handful of isolated locations in Michigan and Manitoba. There has been significant **concern about looming extinction**, especially as population sizes continued to fall to critically low numbers as recently as 2022 (especially in the U.S.).

Fortunately, the Minnesota Zoo, John Ball Zoo in cooperation with Michigan State University, and Assiniboine Park Conservancy have developed foundational rearing and breeding protocols and are releasing thousands of individuals to stabilize and grow the world’s last populations. **The entire U.S. population is now likely derived from just 18 females that existed in Zoo-care at the beginning of the breeding program.** These organizations are bringing new hope for the species’ survival.

“The world would be a smaller, lonelier place without this amazing little butterfly. We seem to have narrowly averted extinction, but the big gains that we have made to help ensure a brighter future for Poweshiek skipperling could have not happened in a vacuum. We are proud to work alongside John Ball Zoo and Assiniboine Park Conservancy and dozens of other incredible partners,” said **Dr. Erik Runquist, Conservation Research Scientist at the Minnesota Zoo**. “This award recognizes years of perseverance, scientific innovation, and deep partnership across borders.”

Over the past decade, these organizations have led a coordinated effort that has likely prevented the imminent extinction of Poweshiek skipperling by:

* **Releasing thousands of Zoo-reared adults into the last populations** in both the U.S. and Canada. For example, over 1,200 adults were released in the U.S. in the summer 2025 and there are promising early signs of early of population growth and recovery.
* Conducting the **first-ever reintroductions** for the species in Canada (2023) and the U.S. (2024).
* Conducting **cutting-edge field research**, including developing a unique wing-marking technique to track survival and movement in the wild, sequencing the whole genome of the species and using the data to inform conservation decisions, and conducting research to understand key threats like non-target pesticide exposure, invasive species, and climate change.
* Building strong collaborations and serving in leadership roles through the **Poweshiek Skipperling International Partnership (savingskippers.org)**, aligning dozens of government, academic, and community partners across borders.

In recognition of their outstanding leadership, **Minnesota Zoo conservation biologists Cale Nordmeyer and Dr. Erik Runquist** were also independently named **2024 Recovery Champions** by the Midwest Region of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for these efforts.

The Poweshiek skipperling is listed as an Endangered species in the United States and in Canada and Critically Endangered on the IUCN Red List. The Minnesota Zoo began working with Poweshiek skipperling in 2012, with Assiniboine Park Conservancy launching a parallel program in 2016 and John Ball Zoo (in partnership with the Haddad Lab of Michigan State University) joining the effort in 2021. All institutions collaborate to help achieve formal recovery criteria developed by the U.S. and Canadian governments. In Canada, the Assiniboine Park Conservancy has developed a parallel program to rear and release skipperlings into southern Manitoba’s Tall Grass Prairie Preserve — a location that holds the last populations of the species in Canada. Funding was provided from the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Threatened and Endangered Species Template, Minnesota Zoo Foundation, and many other committed partners. This recognition by the AZA underscores the importance of sustained, collaborative conservation and the vital role that accredited zoos and aquariums play in species recovery.

While challenges remain, the measurable progress seen in 2024 and 2025 — including verified persistence at the reintroduction site and a dramatic increase in wild sightings — provides much-needed optimism for the future of the Poweshiek skipperling.

**About the AZA North American Conservation Award**

The **AZA North American Conservation Award** recognizes exceptional efforts toward the conservation of wildlife native to North America. Honorees must demonstrate measurable impacts, strong partnerships, and a commitment to long-term success in species recovery.

**About the Minnesota Zoo**

The Minnesota Zoo is a year-round destination providing a window into the natural world. With hundreds of species of animals, worldwide conservation efforts, and acres of scenic beauty, the Zoo is a resource to connect people, animals, and the natural world to save wildlife. The Minnesota Zoo is an accredited member of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) and an institutional member of the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums (WAZA). The Minnesota Zoo is home to beloved traditions, such as Farm Babies, the Jack-O-Lantern Spectacular, and Wild Nights Music series. For more information visit [mnzoo.org](http://www.mnzoo.org).

**Press Assets:** [**Poweshiek Skipperling**](https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fo/1ljb6dxli9mplwniicc2u/AIjXHh-FQz9HweL6WaEowqY?rlkey=o7kpnxs83d0z57bs7gvxe0gdx&st=nni9m5ey&dl=0)

**Media Contacts:** Minnesota Zoo - Diana Hein | [diana.hein@state.mn.us](mailto:diana.hein@state.mn.us) | 952-681-9199

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