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Zoo matriarch and unborn calf die during delivery

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FORT WORTH -- Everyone at the Fort Worth Zoo anticipated a miracle of birth.

Babe, the 40-year-old matriarch of the zoo's elephant herd, had carried her calf to full term, a whopping 22 months. Beginning on Dec. 14, the keepers kept a 24-hour watch on her, sleeping at the zoo in shifts to make sure all would end happily.

On Sunday, Babe started contractions.

On Thursday, Babe died in her sleep. The calf, a female, went with her, undelivered.

"It's the toughest thing I've seen these guys go through," said Ron Surratt, director of animal collections, speaking of the elephant keepers.

Zoo Director Michael Fouraker described a staff in "shock" and reeling from the loss of Babe, who had lived at the zoo longer than any other mammal in the park and acted as the disciplinarian of the herd.

Babe's death marked another setback in the zoo's efforts to breed Asian elephants. Bluebonnet, 9 years old, is the only successful birth at the zoo since breeding started in the mid-1990s.

Babe had three unsuccessful pregnancies, the last in 2002 when she delivered a stillborn calf.

Fouraker and Surratt said that the zoo will continue attempting to breed its herd, four of which are cows and two of which are bulls.

The Asian elephants in the captive U.S. population are reproducing so slowly that their viability is threatened in the coming decades. Fully a third of all captive elephant pregnancies end in the death of the calf, which a number of critics point to as evidence that elephants do not thrive in captivity.

Breeding elephants is one of the highest priorities for the Association of Zoos and Aquariums.

"It's important for elephant conservation for us to continue," Surratt said. "Because you have some troubles and tribulations, you don't give up on the conservation."

A necropsy -- the animal version of an autopsy -- was performed Thursday night in the presence of nine veterinarians, six of them flown on short notice to Fort Worth.

They ruled that Babe died of peritonitis, caused by a torn uterus.