

Jovian ^[1]

Jovian

April 10, 1994 – November 10, 2014

By Chris T. Smith, Duke Lemur Center, 2014; Revised by SLNC Government and Heritage Library, July 2023

Jovian was a Coquerel's sifaka ^[2] (a species of lemur) chosen to star in the title role of the popular PBS children's television series Zoboomafoo ^[3], which began airing in 1999. Jovian was born April 10, 1994 to mother Flavia and father Nigel at the Duke Lemur Center ^[4] in Durham, where Jovian lived until he passed away in 2014.

The educational wildlife show was created and hosted by the Kratt brothers ^[5], Chris and Martin, and partially filmed on location at the Duke Lemur Center. In real life Jovian of course could not actually talk, sing or dance, but he was a very playful, personable sifaka – ideal for a children's show about animals. The show also featured a puppet version of the Zoboomafoo character operated by puppeteer Gord Robertson.

In June 1997, Chris and Martin Kratt visited the Duke Lemur Center to look for a host for their show. Martin Kratt graduated from Duke University with a degree in biological anthropology (now called evolutionary anthropology) and was a volunteer technician assistant at the Lemur Center while a student. He knew where to find charismatic, playful animals whose appearances are almost cartoonish – and Coquerel's sifaka ^[6], a species of lemur native to Madagascar, was a perfect candidate. Chris and Martin selected Jovian as their host. And like many young sifaka, he was playful, active, and athletic, taking big leaps through trees (seen in the opening of the show) and bouncing around the stage like a spring.

The Zoboomafoo Cage was built for filming on location at the Lemur Center. It was attached to an animal care building where the lemurs would sleep inside and be released into during the day for filming. The Cage was a complete television sound stage with lights and props, inspected by Lemur Center veterinarians for anything that could harm the animals. Because lemurs live in social groups, Jovian and his parents lived together and all had access to the stage to acclimate to the surroundings. They were first introduced to the stage on October 4, 1997, and filming began October 5 and lasted until October 17. Jovian performed above expectations. The program won a Daytime Emmy Award ^[7] for Outstanding Directing in a Children's Series in 2001, a Parents' Choice Gold Award for Spring 2001, and a Silver Honor for Fall 2001.

Zoboomafoo ended production in 2001, and with life on the red carpet over, Jovian settled down and fathered four children with mate Alexianus, the first born on February 12, 2003, named Marius followed by Maria, Rufus and Geta. He later took a second mate, Pia, with whom he fathered eight children including: Charlemagne (Charlie for short), Matilda, Conrad, Adelaide, Wilhemina, Gisela, Ferdinand, and Gertrude. Jovian had a total of 12 kids between the two females.

Charlemagne, after being kicked out of the family group by Jovian, now lives on the summer tour path at the Lemur Center (it is a common practice for adult males in the wild to remove possible competitors from their groups, forcing males who are coming-of-age to find a new group and thus also diversifying the gene pool). Wilhemina travelled cross-country to the Cincinnati Zoo where she was recommended for breeding. Adelaide unfortunately succumbed to a fatal bacterial infection in the summer of 2011. Before Jovian's death, Jovian, Pia, Conrad, and Gisela made up a very happy family living in the forest of Natural Habitat Enclosure 3 where Jovian was often found lounging in the sunshine, helping himself to a mimosa – mimosa leaves, that is – and occasionally play-wrestling on the ground with son Conrad.

Jovian was strong and able to leap amazing distances through the trees. Sifaka have been known to leap more than 30 feet from tree to tree. In Madagascar, a sifaka can live to be 15 to 20 years old. At the Lemur Center lemurs often live into their late 20s and early 30s since they are provided with a nutritious diet, plenty of exercise, veterinary care, and, of course, there are no predators.

Jovian died at the Duke Lemur Center, in Durham, North Carolina, on Monday November 10, 2014 at the age of 20.

Energetic and healthy long past the normal life span of 15 for wild lemurs, Jovian's health began to suffer in 2014 and he died from kidney failure.

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Image Credits:

"ZOBOOMAF00 THEME." YouTube video. Uploaded by purewestmusic, December 17, 2011. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jj9u6SGB_GY [14] (accessed May 14, 2014).

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[Smith, Chris T.](#) [19]

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