The ornate box turtle (Terrapene ornata) is protected in six Midwestern states, including Illinois, where this threatened species is fragmented across limited prairie habitat. To further its recovery in the state, conservation scientists and animal care staff at Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago, Ill., and Niabi Zoo in Coal Valley, Ill., are undertaking an expanded headstart and release program in partnership with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS).

How does it work? Eggs are collected from a stable ornate box turtle population in the wild and brought to Lincoln Park Zoo and Niabi Zoo, where they’re incubated. After hatching, juveniles will spend a year growing under the expert care of zoo professionals. This head start will give the growing turtles a better chance to gain a foothold in the wild.

“Our team is going to see to it that these turtles are strong, mature and ready to thrive in the wild when they leave the Zoo,” says Lincoln Park Zoo General Curator Dave Bernier. “In addition to providing them a wonderful home, we’re setting them up for success.”

When the turtles are mature enough to be released, the Zoo’s partners from the USFWS help the reptiles settle into their new home at Lost Mound Sand Prairie in Savanna, Ill. The area was determined to be the best site within the state to reestablish the ornate box turtle. It includes 1,629 hectares of sand prairie, ideal habitat for the species, and is managed under state and federal protection.

Thanks to the generous support of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums’ (AZA) Conservation Grants Fund (CGF), the zoos were able to reintroduce 23 ornate box turtle hatchlings. At the Lincoln Park Zoo, 21 additional hatchlings continue to grow. These will be released in 2014.

Headstarted turtles will be released and monitored for at least five years to track behavior and survival. The project’s long-term goal is to establish 100 turtles at Lost Mound Sand Prairie.

To view footage of the recovery site, and learn more about this conservation initiative, please visit: www.lpzoo.org/conservation-science/projects/ornate-box-turtle-population-recovery-illinois.

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