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NC Zoo Society
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ALIVE

SUMMER
2026



ALIVE

Summer 2026 Issue No.124

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On the Cover

Sam, the Barred Owl

By Hanna Tulloch

Please go to **nczoo.com** *to purchase any items listed in the* Alive *magazine or to make a donation to the Zoo Society. If you have questions, or need help, please give us a call at 336-879-7273.*

The North Carolina Zoo is open daily, weather permitting, except on Christmas and Thanksgiving. Zoo ticket sales begin at 9 a.m. and end at 4 p.m. from April 1—November 1; sales begin at 9 a.m. and end at 3 p.m. the rest of the year.

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Our Commitment to Protecting Nature's Gifts

Based on information compiled from NCZoo conservation reports.

More than three decades ago, the North Carolina Zoo took its first steps into conservation programming. Early on, these steps focused on breeding and caring for endangered species living in the care of our Zoo. Rather quickly, though, these inside jobs spread beyond the Zoo's borders to encompass rare and endangered species ranging free in the wilds of North Carolina and on other continents. At last count, Zoo conservation teams were contributing to wildlife conservation in more than 25 foreign countries and in the mountains, Sandhills, and eastern pine forests of North Carolina.

At home or on these foreign sites, our conservation staff often work in mysterious ways—sometimes performing tasks that seem disconnected from the wild species they hope to protect. You won't, for example, see Zoo staff tracking down poachers or chasing marauding elephants out of millet fields. What you will see, though, after Zoo staff moves in, are declines in poaching rates and fewer fatal clashes breaking out between people and wandering elephants.

Zoo staff won't roll out measuring wheels or crouch behind theodolites to draw plot lines for proposed parks or reserves. What they will do, instead, is equip local rangers and biologists to precisely map migration routes and biological hotspots (vital food or water resources) inside vast wilderness areas. These data help governments and communities decide where to locate reserves and when to schedule ranger patrols that provide the best protection for wildlife.

Now and then, Zoo conservation takes a more conventional tone, so you will encounter staff sloshing along muddy banks to release a few dozen Zoo-reared tadpoles into a pond. Or, you may hear about staff setting up mist nets to capture and evacuate rare Hawaiian bird species from islands overrun by the invasive Brown Tree Snake. Captured birds ride away, escorted by staff to start a new life on a nearby, snake-free island.

Wherever they work, and whether they come in contact with wild animals or not, Zoo conservationists never work alone. They always collaborate closely with local rangers, governments, and community leaders to find practical, economic solutions to wildlife conservation problems. Local conservationists improve the efficacy of these programs by sharing their deep understanding of the local wildlife and ecology. Zoo staff contributes by offering training and technology to document and analyze the current status of wildlife and assess the impact remedial efforts have on these numbers.

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SAVING WILDLIFE

The Zoo's most widespread contribution to wildlife conservation stems from its developmental and leadership association with SMART®. SMART is an easy-to-use technology that allows rangers and researchers to digitally record, analyze, and map information they collect in the field. These maps—say of migration routes or poacher encampments—can be uploaded onto the internet to make the information available over long distances. The technology makes it easy to share a wealth of data about developing risks to animals and habitats and provides information that can be used to assess the effectiveness of ranger patrols and other interventions.

Every year, Zoo staff trains hundreds of rangers and conservationists to use SMART to protect natural areas. Currently, Zoo conservationists support SMART operations in more than 40 sites scattered across Canada and in eight African countries. For example, SMART systems are being used to protect Zambian Leopards and Lions, Namibian Black Rhinos, and Great Apes living in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, and Rwanda.

In Canada, Inuit harvesters use a bespoke bilingual (English-Inuktitut) SMART platform to track and share wildlife sightings. The system improves their management strategies by increasing the accuracy of location data and the methods used to analyze these data. The system incorporates Inuit traditional knowledge into its database, underscoring native contributions to the stewardship of Arctic wildlife and their rights to ownership and oversight of their historic lands. Currently, 380 Inuit harvesters from 10 communities use this platform to collect and share wildlife data.

GIVING VULTURES THEIR DUE

Vultures, unlike Pandas, don't inspire warmth or empathy even though they, unlike Pandas, are key stewards of human health and ecosystem wellbeing inside five of the Earth's seven continents.

Vultures' intrinsic value stems from their super sanitation powers. They clear and disinfect habitats and neighborhoods by making short shifts of dead animals. Hand a lone vulture three pounds of flesh, and it will disappear in less than an hour. Call in a 100 or so of the birds, and they can strip a 100-pound carcass clean in three minutes flat. Beyond removing the remains, vultures kill any dangerous bacteria or viruses lurking in every beakful. Their culinary habits remove and destroy dangerous bacteria (i.e., anthrax, botulism) and viruses (i.e. rabies, ebola) before they can infect animals and people living close by.

Despite the debt humans owe them for keeping our families and habitats healthy, vultures frequently fall victim to human hostilities. Their situation in Africa is especially dire. Vulture populations have plummeted by 80 percent during the last 50 years. In many cases, the vultures' deaths were deliberate.

They were poisoned by farmers who laced carcasses with pesticides in order to kill lions and other large predators scavenging on a kill. Poachers poison vultures the same way, too, to prevent them from circling overhead and alerting rangers to a poaching site.

For nearly a decade, the North Carolina Zoo has worked with conservation groups to protect vulture species living in eastern and southern Africa. The teams use lightweight GPS trackers to monitor the travels of hundreds of individual vultures—both to learn about their habitat needs and to detect and quickly locate mass poisonings affecting the birds.

The GPS trackers have provided a wealth of data on the vast distances vultures travel and the varied landscapes they visit. The birds sail over hundreds of miles every day, and visit vast, interconnected habitats. Mapping the corridors vultures follow on these flights pinpoints areas that need extra protection. Dispatching rangers to these locations protects vultures and other wildlife as well.

Following many vultures via satellite also alerts officials to flying patterns typically exhibited by sick or dying birds. Armed with these data, rangers and other officials can be quickly dispatched to potential poisoning sites to investigate and sometimes arrest lawbreakers.



To prevent future poisonings, Zoo conservation staff collaborates with local communities to help them understand the dangers associated with pesticide poisonings and to help them adopt alternative and safer methods for protecting their livestock from predators. In 2024, these programs reached 465 individuals, informing them of new and better ways to protect their domestic animals.

KEEPING TRACK OF ELEPHANTS

The Zoo also uses GPS technology to better understand and protect wild elephants living in Africa. This conservation program operates inside two UNESCO World Heritage Sites and Biosphere Reserves in the Ivory Coast.



Working in collaboration with the Ivory Coast's Office of Parks and Reserves, Zoo veterinary staff visit the country annually to attach satellite tracking collars to elephants living in and around these parks. The collars transmit location data to satellites that relay the information to computers that track and accurately map the data points.

Over time, these points accumulate to provide an accurate picture of the migration routes and specific habitats an elephant and its herd depend on during the year. These maps inform rangers and government officials about areas that need protection or are at risk of inciting human-elephant conflicts. To date, Zoo staff has collared 45 elephants in Ivory Coast and has recorded 68,954 data points to create maps of their travels.

This Ivory Coast study is patterned after an elephant conservation program that the Zoo implemented in Cameroon more than twenty-five years ago. That program dramatically reduced human-elephant conflicts around several national parks in Cameroon and has provided a successful model for researching and protecting wild elephants in other locations.

BREEDING AND RESTORING SPECIES

Not all of the Zoo conservation work takes place in the wild. Some rely on on-site programs that breed and raise rare animals with the hope of releasing some of them into habitats formerly occupied by their ancestors. These breeding and introduction programs provide intensive support for species whose populations are too small and vulnerable to recover without extensive human intervention.

Such is the case of the American Red Wolf—a species nearly hunted and poisoned out of existence. By the time the Endangered Species Act became law in 1973, relentless persecution had extirpated American Red Wolves from more than 99 percent of their former range, leaving only 14 living wolves to carry on the species.

Since then, an army of devoted conservationists and zoologists has coaxed the species back from the brink by establishing a nationwide, carefully managed breeding program to increase the size of the population without shrinking its genetic diversity.

Today, approximately 200 American Red Wolves live under human care in 49 propagation and breeding facilities coordinated by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums. These breeding programs support the US Fish and Wildlife Service's efforts to reestablish a wild population of American Red Wolves in and around the Alligator River and Pocosin Lakes wildlife refuges in eastern North Carolina. Currently, about 30 wild wolves roam through this area.

The North Carolina Zoo joined this effort in 1995, when Red Wolves first arrived at the Zoo, and has since played a leading role in breeding and researching these animals. The Zoo currently houses the second-largest group of Red Wolves living under human care and is actively conducting 10 major research projects to improve their husbandry and enhance the survival rates of wolves released into the wild.

SWEATING THE SMALL STUFF

Reptiles and Amphibians enjoy similar attention from the Zoo's conservation staff. Because North Carolina shines as a "global hotspot" for salamander species, it is not surprising to see staff working to protect Eastern Hellbenders (native to our mountain streams) and Eastern Tiger Salamanders. Staff also collaborates with the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission to protect several native frog species.



The Zoo has spent more than a decade surveying Hellbender populations in the Appalachian Mountains and installing nest boxes for them to use in clear mountain streams. Inside the Zoo, staff conducts "head starting" programs for Gopher Frogs and Tiger Salamanders. These programs gather frog and salamander eggs from the wild and protect them until they develop into tadpoles and larvae that can be safely returned to the wild. More than 2,000 Gopher Frog tadpoles have gone through this process and been released in the Sandhills. These introductions have already established a new breeding population of this species, which is endangered in North Carolina. In a related success story, staff rescued more than 150 Eastern Tiger Salamander larvae from a degraded pond, head started them at the Zoo, and later released them into healthy, sustainable wetlands

PROTECTING WILD HABITATS

The Zoo values land as well as wildlife. As a consequence, the Zoo stewards more than 2,300 acres of ecologically valuable land inside the state. In its stewardship role, the Zoo actively manages these spaces to keep them viable and to make them available for public enjoyment

In addition to managing the property that houses the Zoo and its surrounding acres of forests and network of hiking trails, staff tends to three separate nature preserves. These contained unfragmented areas housing important wildlife corridors and interesting and unusual biological and geological features.

The Nichols Longleaf Pine Preserve protects the largest known stand of old-growth longleaf pine in Piedmont North Carolina. Ridges Mountain Nature Preserve protects a landscape strewn with towering rock formations and an uncommon community of plant species. The third property, the Ward Nature Preserve, protects the headwaters of Bachelor Creek, helping ensure that clean water continues to flow downstream. Purgatory Mountain, a monadnock that sits just inside the Zoo boundary, supports several unfragmented and unusual plant communities and wetlands. It also houses several miles of hiking trails that are available to the public, free of charge, during the Zoo's visiting hours.

Zoo staff monitors the plants and animals living in these protected areas and uses these data to track the health of these living communities. Field surveys, camera data, and community science activities allow the Zoo to confirm which ecosystems remain healthy and which ones require intervention.

The Zoo also honors this land by adhering to sustainability principles throughout its operations. Its commitment to sustainability includes implementing zoo-wide policies that reduce water consumption and conserve energy. For example, twenty-five percent of the Zoo's fleet vehicles are powered by electricity, and electric charging stations are available to Zoo guests.

The Zoo has also committed to phasing out single-use plastics across its gift shops and operations. It offers compostable food packaging—snack cups made with 100 percent corn oil, cutlery made from plant fibers, and popcorn bags made from wood fibers.

This packaging and animal and plant waste is composted onsite at the Zoo, producing more than 2,000 tons of compost that the Zoo uses as fertilizer instead of sending it to a landfill.

CONSERVATION PARNTERS

The Zoo understands the power of community connections and builds relationships with conservation partners worldwide. At present, it collaborates with more than 90 active partners operating in some 20 different countries.

This *Alive* discusses only a fraction of the conservation work that the Zoo conducts alongside these partners. A more thorough and detailed account of their work is available in an in-house publication titled *Conservation & Research - North Carolina Zoo.* This 61-page document, which served as the source for much of this article, provides a more thorough account of the Zoo's conservation initiatives as well as its research and educational programming. The full contents of *Conservation & Research - North Carolina Zoo* can be downloaded from the North Carolina Zoo Society's webpage at https://www.nczoo.com/forms/saving-vulnerable-species/ or by using this QR Code.

Help the Zoo get the inside scoop on its animals' well being.

Getting the inside scoop on a sick lion requires patience and sturdy diagnostic equipment. You can't trust a lion or cobra to tell you where it hurts or to curl up in the front seat while you drive it to the veterinary hospital for an annual check-up or an emergency exam. Whenever possible, zoo animals do best when they remain close to their habitats. Staying put—puts less stress on an animal and its keepers and saves time in an emergency.

Portable endoscopes and ultrasound equipment allow veterinarians to reach their patients quickly and efficiently, whether responding to emergencies or scheduling and conducting routine exams. Routine exams are lifesavers; they can detect cancers or other diseases early—when treatments are most effective and outcomes most promising.

At present, the Zoo relies on portable diagnostic machines that are nearly 20 years old. Their age, coupled with the arrival of dozens of new Asian animals, has put enormous stress on the Zoo's veterinary resources. The Zoo needs at least one new portable endoscope and one or more portable ultrasound machines to help it continue to provide high-quality care as more Asian—and later Australian—animals arrive. The new equipment's improved images will provide veterinarians with more detailed and potentially life-saving diagnostic information.

Thanks to the generosity of our donors, we have already raised more than half the funds we need to purchase the requested diagnostic equipment. A gift from you will push us that much closer to ensuring that our veterinarians have the equipment they need to care for its current animals and the new Asian animals arriving every day!

Thank you!

Cheryl Armstrong

Cheryl Armstrong
Executive Director
NC Zoo Society

Saving a Piece of the World for its Wildlife

NC Zoo Society

North Carolina ZOO AND BOTANICAL GARDENS

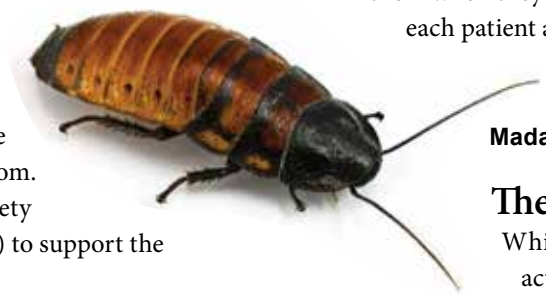


Zoo Veterinary Care - By the Numbers

Based on the Zoo publication North Carolina Zoo - Veterinary Report.

A dedicated team of highly trained professionals provide for the medical needs of animals living in the Zoo or receiving treatment in the Valerie H. Schindler Wildlife Rehabilitation Center.

Their care is managed by an 18-member Animal Health Section, which supports positions for three full-time veterinary specialists, eight registered veterinary technicians, four wildlife rehabilitators, three hospital keepers, and one hospital register. Along with these Zoo positions, the team collaborates with the North Carolina State College of Veterinary Medicine to offer a three-year post-veterinary school residency in zoological medicine—the speciality that focuses on the medical needs of the wild and untamed species that make up 99.9 percent of the animal kingdom. The North Carolina Zoological Society provides funding ($75,000 annually) to support the residency program.



Madagascar Hissing Roach *(actual size)*

A Parade of Patients

On any given day, the Zoo houses more than 2,000 individual animals that belong to nearly 200 species. These animals range in size from tiny insects (e.g. a Giant Desert Hairy Scorpion that weighs less than a quarter of an ounce), to Louis, the Zoo's largest African Elephant. This bull weighs around 10,000 pounds.The Zoo's highly-trained veterinary team works in concert with the Zoo's animal care staff to ensure the health and well-being of each of these individual animals.

A quick glance at the Veterinary Section's annual appointment schedule demonstrates the complexity and frequency of the team's interactions with the Zoo's animals. In the annual count taken before Asian species began arriving, veterinary staff completed 3,218 appointments with the Zoo's animals. Most of these appointments (1,895) dealt with the health needs of mammals inside the Zoo — but the team also scheduled 496 appointments with reptiles, 422 with birds, 364 with amphibians, 35 with fish, and 6 with invertebrates! These appointments required the veterinarians to order and run 3,331 diagnostic tests, fill 1,790 prescriptions, perform 176 anesthesia procedures and administer 147 vaccines.

Along with attending to the Zoo's animals, the veterinary team also operates the Valerie H. Schindler Wildlife Rehabilitation Center, a small hospital that offers free veterinary care to orphaned and injured or sick native wildlife. The Center admits around 500 to 700 animals annually, almost all of them transported to the center by nearby residents who find the animals in distress.

A substantial percentage of these patients are orphans that are admitted to the Center's bird or mammal nursery. Staff and volunteers tend to these youngsters adhering to protocols that keep the babies wary of people and prepare them to be released and live successfully in the wild. A separate Veterinary Ward handles intensive care and dangerous cases including turtles with aural abscesses or the occasional orphaned Bobcat kitten or pneumonia-stricken River Otter pup.

While rehabilitation staff and volunteers see to the day-to-day nursing needs of the patents, including admitting and stabling them when they arrive, Zoo veterinarians examine and diagnose each patient and prescribe its treatment plan, always with the hope of returning it to the wild.

The Scope of Their Work

While much of the veterinary staff's day-to-day activities mirror the routines typically conducted in a small animal veterinarian's office—the cliental, treatments, handling protocols, diagnostic readouts, and potential complications are infinitely more diverse and complex. Every species has its own specific set of medical, nutritional, behavioral, reproductive, and developmental needs, and the Zoo's veterinary team plays a vital role in meeting these needs. From conducting routine checkups and emergency surgeries to consulting on well-balanced diets and assessing the safety of enrichment items, the Zoo's veterinary staff plays a role in almost every aspect of the Zoo animals' lives. And, they must be savvy and skilled when it comes to examining and treating large predators, venomous snakes, injured birds, lethargic turtles, and depressed Hissing Cockroaches. Every species and every individual animal is treated with the utmost care and expertise.

The breadth of knowledge required to provide for the health and well-being of so many different species explains why Zoo veterinarians are board certified in zoological medicine—the speciality that focuses on the health and well being of non-domestic animals. It also explains why the staff conducts and publishes research on ways to improve the care of zoo animals. In 2022-2023, the Animal Health Team contributed to the publication of 45 peer-reviewed articles that appeared in scientific and veterinary journals.

Our dedicated team of highly trained professionals also provides for the medical needs of animals living in the Zoo and the treatment in the Valerie H. Schindler Wildlife Rehabilitation Center.

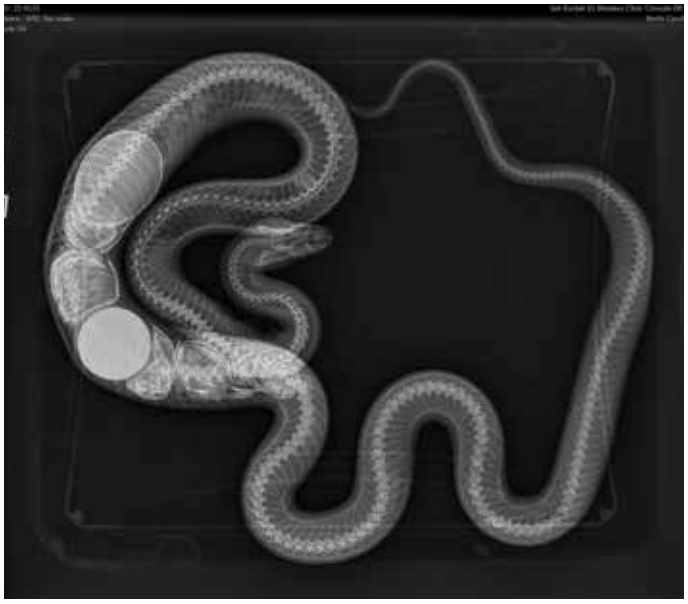
A Case in Point

The Zoo's Valerie H. Schindler Wildlife Rehabilitation Center exists to reduce the pain and suffering of orphaned, sick or injured native animals. It is an equal opportunity facility, serving reptiles and amphibians as well as cute orphaned chicks or otter pups. Consequently, the Center's veterinary staff and volunteers must be prepared to deal with a wide range of species, including some species that people, in general, may try to avoid.

Such was the case with a Black Rat Snake that a concerned neighbor brought to the Zoo's rehab center recently. The following vignette describes how Zoo veterinarian Dr. Megan Cabot diagnosed and treated the snake, which recovered and was returned to the wild.

The Snake in the Rough

Megan Cabot



Not long ago, a Zoo neighbor brought a struggling adult Black Rat Snake to the Zoo's rehab center. The neighbor saw it hiding in a chicken coup, and was alarmed by a large, hard bump she noticed distorting the snake's body.

After admitting the snake, the center's rehabilitation team X-rayed it and right away diagnosed the snake's condition. It had slipped into that coop hunting for chicken eggs and encountered a nest seeded with golfballs. Breeders often use golfballs or wooden eggs as a hack to encourage chickens to lay eggs in nest boxes or to give a broody hen something to sit on.

Because snakes can't tell decoy eggs from real ones, they usually eat both. Unfortunately for the snake, it can't digest the decoy eggs, and they can get lodged in its stomach. Luckily, for this snake, though, our Veterinary Team was on the case!

We anesthetized it and supported its respiration with a tiny breathing tube. Then we fed a snake-sized endoscope—equipped with a camera and a wire net on its end—into the sleeping snake's mouth and down into its stomach. Peering through the scope, we could find the golfball and capture it inside the net. Once secured, we pulled everything—scope, camera, net, and ball—out through the snake's mouth. After spending some recovery time being cared for by the rehab center's team, the snake recovered and was released back into the wild.

We are grateful to the neighbor who felt compassion for the snake and brought it to us for treatment. And, we want to encourage anyone who uses fake eggs in their chicken coups to glue the decoys together in the shape of a pyramid. This shape is hard to swallow so it protects snakes from ingesting the foreign objects.

Maternity Matters

Not all conservation takes place in the wild. Sometimes species conservation requires zoological institutions to cooperate in managing and maintaining shared populations of rare or endangered species. This cooperation allows multiple zoos to house and breed a much larger population of rare animals than any single zoo could tackle on its own.

By cooperating in their breeding and husbandry practices, institutions can track animal bloodlines to prevent inbreeding. Further, every individual can have the opportunity to pass its genes on to the next generation. This shared program is overseen by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums and is known as "SAFE," an acronym for Saving Animals From Extinction.

Veterinary staff contributes to the Zoo's involvement in various SAFE programs by assessing potential parents' reproductive health and monitoring the health of a mother and her offspring during her pregnancy. Once the babies arrive, veterinary staff conducts neonatal exams and continues to conduct checkups and provide vaccines as each animal matures. On the flip side, if an animal is too young to breed or not ready for parenting, veterinarians can provide contraceptives to prevent unwanted pregnancies.



This article was condensed from information in the Zoo publication North Carolina Zoo Veterinary Report. The full report is available for download at https://nczoo.com.veterinary-care or by scanning the QR Code on the right.

VIP Tours and Programs in the Works for 2026

Admission Prices: $115/per person for North Carolina Zoo Society members, $139/per person for non-members. To order your tour, visit nczoo.com and select “VIP” tours under “Extraordinary Experiences.”

Many tours sell out quickly, so now is the best time to buy. (Tours can be canceled or rescheduled if a buyer’s schedule changes.) Our VIP Tours have posted age restrictions and are unsuitable for young children. A paying adult must accompany children younger than 18.

Please keep in mind that weather or other unanticipated challenges may necessitate date changes. Full refunds or alternate reservation dates are provided. Also note that some aspects of a tour may not be accessible to guests with mobility issues, but most tour experiences can be accommodated. Please inform us ahead of time so that we can discuss options.

PUBLIC VIP TOURS*

We schedule all public tours on Saturdays between March 1 and October 31. Start times and age requirements vary among the different tours and are posted online. Many tours are already Wait List Only **(WLO)**. We will post our 2027 tour scheduled at the end of October.

AVIAN (BIRD) PROPAGATION VISIT
Visit the Zoo’s secluded bird breeding site. Minimum Age: 10
Meeting Time: 10:15 a.m.
Dates: Sept. 26

BLACK BEAR & GRIZZLY BEARS
Training two bears. Minimum Age: 10
Begins at 1:30 p.m.
Dates: June 6, July 25, Oct. 23

CHIMPANZEES IN TRAINING
Exclusive photo opportunity; not ADA accessible. Minimum Age: 12
Begins at 3 p.m.
Dates: June 6, Oct. 17

COUGAR CLOSE-UP
Managing swampy beasts.
Begins at 1:30 p.m.
Dates: Aug. 22, Oct. 17 (WLO)

ELEPHANTS UP CLOSE
ALL TOURS WLO; ADA Restrictions**
Elephant Training! Minimum Age: 12
Meeting Time: 1:15 p.m.
Dates: June 20, September 19, October 10

MEET AND FEED GIRAFFES
All behind the scenes. Minimum Age: 6
Begins at 3 p.m.
Dates: All WLO except for October June 13, Aug. 15, Sept. 19, Oct. 3

GORILLAS’ CARE & TRAINING*
Keeping Gorillas Healthy
Minimum Age: 8.
Program begins 1:30 p.m.
Dates: Sept. 12 (WLO), Oct. 10

LION BEHIND THE SCENES*
ADA Restrictions**
Lion training and feeding.
Minimum Age: 12
Begins at 2 p.m.
Tour Dates: All WLO July 18, Sept. 19

MEET AND FEED AN OTTER
Guests meet reptiles & feed an otter!
Begins 11 a.m. Minimum Age: 8
Dates: May 16, July 18, Aug. 1, Oct. 3
Masks May be Required.

PUFFINS & POLAR BEARS…*
… FOR ADULTS ONLY
A grown-up encounter.
Minimum Age: 12 Begins at 10:30 a.m.
Dates: June 20 (WLO), August 22, October 3 (WLO)

… TOUR AS A FAMILY AFFAIR
Modified for children to attend with adult.
Begins 10:30 a.m. Minimum Age: 5
Tour Dates: July 11 (WLO), September 19

RHINOS—Up Close
Pet these gentle giants!
Begins at 10:45 a.m., Minimum Age: 8
Tour Dates: June 6, July 11, September 26, October 17

Wolf Howl
An after-hours walk in the Zoo to learn about wolves and, we hope, hear them howl! Minimum Age: 10
Begins at 6:30 p.m.
Tour Date: September 14

Learn more about these events and others at https://nczoo.COM

PRIVATE BEHIND-THE-SCENES TOURS

Private Tours and Public Tours follow the same agenda, but Private Tours can be scheduled on any day of the week, and a few Private Tours are available year round. Unless otherwise stated, tours are available March through October only.

Buyers select the date for their private tour and may invite up to five guests to attend private tour except the Bison & Elk Safari. This Safari is limited to a buyer and 3 guests. Stated Private Tour prices cover the cost of everyone attending a tour, including their Zoo admission fees.

Member price: $545 for most tours, $475 for the Bison & Elk Safari. Non-members pay an additional $50 to schedule a private tour.

AVIAN (BIRD) PROPAGATION VISIT
Minimum Age: 10 - Available all year

BLACK BEAR & GRIZZLY BEARS
Minimum Age: 10 - Available all year

CHIMPANZEES IN TRAINING
Minimum Age: 12 - Available all year
ADA Restrictions**

COUGAR CLOSE-UP
Minimum Age 10 - Available all year

ELEPHANTS UP CLOSE
Minimum Age: 12
ADA Restrictions**

MEET AND FEED GIRAFFES
Minimum Age: 6

GORILLAS’ CARE & TRAINING
Minimum Age: 12
Available March - November

MEET AND FEED AN OTTER
Minimum Age: 8 - Available all year
All tours for 2026 have been sold
Masks May be Required.

continues >>>

LION BEHIND THE SCENES
Minimum Age 12 - Available all year
ADA Restrictions**

PUFFINS & POLAR BEARS
Available February - October
… FOR ADULTS ONLY
Minimum Age: 12
… TOUR AS A FAMILY AFFAIR
Minimum Age: 5

RHINOS—Up Close
Minimum age: 8
Available March - November

PRIVATE BISON & ELK SAFARI
Ride through their habitat on a Flat-bed truck. Offered exclusively as a private tour. Limited to 4 people.
Minimum age: 10 Program Begins at 1:30 p.m.
Member Price $475; Non-member add $50

* Some aspects of a tour may not be accessible to guests with mobility issues, but most tour experiences can be accommodated. Please inform us ahead of time so that we can discuss options.

**ALL private VIP tours can be modified to make them ADA Accessible.
Elephant tours cannot be modified to admit wheelchairs, electric scooters, or service dogs.

Weather or other unanticipated challenges may necessitate date changes. Full refunds or alternate reservation dates are provided.

***Learn more at nczoo.COM**

Special Society Ride and Guide Offerings

Trained Society tour guides conducts tours using quiet, electric golf carts. These tours are available weekdays all year.

Reservations are required, and we offer only a few tours each day. Book your tour with one of our professionally trained guides early! Tours accommodate up to 5 guests per cart.

Call 336-879-7365 or 336-879-7270 to learn more or to begin the reservation process.

Keep in Mind: These tours are available on non-holiday weekdays only. You can book a tour for 1.5 hour, 2 hours or 4 hours depending on your plans. You choose the length that suits you best.

Visit https://nczoo.com/ride-guide to learn more or to learn more about scheduling a tour.

Curious About Zoo Veterinary Programs?

Check out the Zoo Society's Shadow a Veterinarian offerings under the *Extraordinary Experiences Menu* at nczoo.com.

We offer a Shadow a Veterinarian for Two program on weekends and a Shadow a Veterinarian for a Day (for one person) during the week.

Zoo Society Veterinary Camps
These programs are available for 7th through 9th graders (one-day Junior Camps) and for 10th through 12 graders (two-day, overnight Senior Camps).

Two upcoming Junior Camps are slated for Saturday, June 6 and Saturday, July 18

Two overnight Senior Camps are scheduled for May 2 & 3 and August 8 & 9 .

Learn more under the Extraordinary Experiences menu at nczoo.com.

Upcoming Special Events and Quiet Days at the NC Zoo

The Zoo plans its events and programs to showcase its natural surroundings and engage guests in exploring the outdoors and wildlife. Ideally, these experiences can be sensory-friendly every day. But, fun and human nature being what they are, mean that sometimes crowds, laughter, and exuberant children can generate enough excitement to overwhelm some guests.

To help meet the needs of its serenity seeking visitors, the Zoo schedules specific days during the year, called "Quiet Days," when it takes steps to keep the Park especially serene and calm for everyone.

On Quiet Days the Zoo limits the size of groups entering the Zoo by not accepting reservations for school field trips or other large groups. It also turns the volume down when it broadcasts messages or music in the Park. As a special treat, Zoo educators also set up quiet, sensory-play experiences in Kidzone on Quiet Days. These calm, muffled play activities are available from 10 a.m. until 2 p.m. on Quiet Days.

QUIET DAY DATES shhh

Times are 9 a.m. - 5 p.m.
Tue, Jun 16
Tue, July 21
Tue, Aug 18
Tue, Sep 15

Zoo Special Events

October 5: KidFest 9 a.m. - 4 p.m.
A day filled with exploration and play
Visit *https://www.nczoo.org/events/kidfest* to learn more

October 18-19 & 24-25 : BOO at the NC Zoo
9 a.m. - 4 p.m.

November 1-8: Beloved Pet Ofrenda
9 a.m. - 4 p.m.

November 8-9: Pumpkin Palooza

Learn more about these events and others at nczoo.ORG



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Adopt a Wolf



This July 4th, we will celebrate an important national milestone—the passage of 250 years since our founding fathers adopted the Declaration of Independence and established the United States of America. To mark the significance of this birthday, the Zoo Society has created a special adoption package dedicated to the preservation and protection of an exclusively American natural treasure — the American Red Wolf, a.k.a. *Canis rufus*.

Not only is this wolf the most endangered of the world's wolf species, it is also the only wolf on Earth that is truly all-American. The species evolved and has always lived entirely within the borders of the United States of America. Additionally, North Carolina is the only place where American Red Wolves range freely in the wild.

At one time, the entire Red Wolf population was reduced to fewer than 20 animals. Today, because of careful breeding and management, that number stands at more than 200 wolves, including some 20 - 30 that the US Fish & Wildlife Service has helped reestablish as wild wolves in eastern North Carolina. Our greatest hope is to help grow this wild population to more than 200 animals and to support the Wildlife Service's efforts to establish a second wild population in another area.

The Zoo wants to contribute to these recovery efforts by expanding its Red Wolf breeding facilities. Currently, we house the second-largest breeding population of these wolves, but all of our facilities are now full—as are 97 percent of the breeding facilities available at the 50 other facilities protecting this species.

By purchasing one of our Special America Red Wolf Adoption Packages, you can help us expand our breeding facility and receive a delightful package of Red Wolf memorabilia. These include a "smart" Red Wolf plush that tracks the movements of a wild red wolf* and a framed picture of one of the Zoo's wolves poising with her four cubs. We also provide a copy of *Freedom's Howl*, a book about a pioneer family and their wolf neighbors, a paw print from a Zoo wolf, a Red Wolf air tag holder, an "I'm Saving the Red Wolf" magnet, and a Red Wolf Fact Sheet and Sticker.

To adopt an American Red Wolf, please go to nczoo.com and click on the "Adoptions" menu item at the top of the page.

* Tracking data is historical to protect wild wolves from potential harassment.

Tails from the Trails:



The Velvet-Tailed Connoisseurs of Opportunity

Brandon Rhoten, Society Donor Relations Officer

Within the grand tapestry of the North Carolina Zoo, where elephants stride with ancient dignity, lions rehearse their resonant vocal declarations, and giraffes float above the landscape like botanical connoisseurs, one might assume the stage is reserved exclusively for such marquee performers.

And then… there are the squirrels.

Yes, those plume-tailed phantoms of the pedestrian pathway. The lightning-fast freeloaders of the forest canopy. The uninvited, yet undeniably charismatic, unofficial welcoming committee of the Zoo grounds.

The Eastern Grey Squirrel, while lacking a formal habitat or scheduled feeding time, holds the distinguished honor of being North Carolina's State Mammal. A title they appear to accept with quiet dignity… and occasional aggressive snack-related ambition.

Grey Squirrels are not merely charming background characters in your Zoo visit. They are ecological heavyweights disguised as fuzzy acrobats. Through their enthusiastic habit of burying nuts and seeds and then displaying what scientists politely refer to as "selective memory", they serve as critical forest regenerators. Entire hardwood ecosystems owe their continued existence to generations of squirrels enthusiastically planting tomorrow's trees and promptly forgetting where they planted them.

In fact, scientists once uncovered plant material in ancient squirrel burrows preserved in permafrost, nearly 32,000 years old, and successfully grew it into a new flowering plant. A triumph for science, certainly…and perhaps the most delayed landscaping project in recorded history. In short, they are nature's most productive accidental landscapers.

Our Zoo's lush, tree-filled landscape offers these native residents a paradise of towering oaks, protective canopy cover, and a seemingly endless parade of unsuspecting snack carriers… also known as visitors. And this is where our tale takes a slightly dramatic turn.

Few sights are as common, or as well-intentioned, as guests attempting to share their refreshments with our free-roaming woodland elite. Crackers are extended. Popcorn is brandished. Snack bags are opened with the reverence of ceremonial offerings. Guests often believe they are providing a small kindness. Unfortunately, squirrels interpret this not as a kindness…but as a legally binding catering contract.

Human snack foods, including crackers and popcorn, lack the nutritional balance squirrels require and can lead to digestive complications, dental damage, and long-term health concerns. Even more alarming, feeding wildlife teaches squirrels to associate humans with food. And once that association is established, their investigative enthusiasm escalates dramatically.

Grey Squirrels do not politely linger. They approach. They assess. They escalate.

They will sit nearby and stare with remarkable intensity. They will inch closer with calculated subtlety. And, if sufficiently convinced that snacks are imminent, they may attempt what can only be described as direct acquisition strategies.

During one Ride and a Guide tour, I witnessed a particularly ambitious demonstration of this phenomenon. A guest casually shifted her foot while seated in the cart, a completely innocent adjustment. However, a nearby squirrel interpreted this movement as the ceremonial prelude to snack distribution. With Olympic-level commitment, the squirrel leapt onto her shoe and began scaling her leg with the determination of a mountaineer chasing destiny.

To the guest's immense credit, she remained impressively composed though her expression suggested she had not anticipated becoming a climbing structure during her Zoo visit. The squirrel, upon discovering that no crackers or popcorn were forthcoming, conducted a swift and dignified retreat and resumed its regularly scheduled surveillance operations nearby.

While undeniably memorable, moments like this highlight why we strongly discourage feeding, touching, or attempting to pet squirrels. These interactions create stress for the animal, increase the risk of scratches or bites, and can expose both humans and wildlife to potential disease transmission. Beneath their luxurious tails and expressive eyes lies a thoroughly wild animal equipped with sharp instincts, sharper teeth, and a business model entirely centered around opportunistic foraging.

Fortunately, squirrels require absolutely no human encouragement to provide world-class entertainment. With even a brief pause along a shaded trail, guests may witness aerial leaps that defy physics, vertical tree sprints that challenge gravity, or heated territorial negotiations over the rightful ownership of a single acorn. It is unscripted theater, performed continuously, with no ticket purchase required.

At the North Carolina Zoo, conservation extends far beyond the animals residing in habitats. It includes protecting native species, preserving natural behaviors, and helping guests understand that even small decisions like keeping snacks to ourselves, play an important role in wildlife health.

So, the next time you encounter a Grey Squirrel posed dramatically along a tree limb, tail flicking with operatic flair, take a moment to appreciate this small yet mighty symbol of North Carolina's natural heritage. Celebrate its role in shaping our forests. Admire its breathtaking athleticism. And perhaps most importantly, safeguard your snack bag with quiet vigilance.

Because, while squirrels may present themselves as charming woodland dignitaries, they are, at heart, consummate opportunists… and once they suspect refreshments are available, they pursue their mission with unwavering, acrobatic resolve.





Prelude: A sad, but unavoidable, consequence of working in a zoo—just like in a hospital or veterinary clinic or anywhere, for that matter– is facing the reality that, no matter how much we love them or care for them, all animals eventually die. Sometimes, we mark these deaths will great pomp and circumstance and sometimes their end is quietly remembered. But, always, their keepers and caretakers grieve the losses. Such was a the case with a quiet loss the Zoo suffered in March when the Zoo lost Sam—an extraordinarily wise owl that lived in the Zoo's Steamside habitat.

Because her quiet life touched so many of us so deeply, we decided to include this well deserved tribute to her life in the epitaph reprinted below.



Photo: Summer Karchet

A Partner in Trust:

North Carolina Zoo Mourns Death of Barred Owl Sam

Hanna Tulloch, Zoo Digital Media Specialist

We are deeply saddened to share the loss of Sam, our beloved Barred Owl and a quiet, steadfast presence at Streamside here at the Zoo. Sam came to us through our Wildlife Rehabilitation Center in 2002 after suffering a wing injury from a car strike. Though she could still fly, her flight was not strong enough for her to survive and hunt successfully in the wild, and so she found her forever home with us.

Already an adult when she arrived, Sam went on to live an extraordinary life, reaching an estimated 25 years of age. In the wild, Barred Owls typically live just 8–10 years. Her longevity was a testament not only to her resilience, but to the dedicated care she received over more than two decades.

Sam was cherished by many keepers throughout her life, but in 2019 she formed a particularly special bond with one keeper. This connection truly started to form in 2020 when he began working with her daily. Through patience and trust, he trained Sam to voluntarily enter her crate for transport, an important part of her care to make transport for medical procedures less stressful. She also learned to fly to a glove and perch calmly on a scale. But what made these behaviors so meaningful wasn't just the training, it was the trust behind them. As a result of the close bond with her keeper, she was very willing to do what he asked of her in training sessions and loved to interact.

It was obvious that Sam favored this one keeper in particular, as she would start to call whenever he was around. She would call when she saw him through the glass of her habitat or when she heard his voice behind the scenes. She was what we lovingly call a "good morning and goodnight" animal, faithfully calling back when her keepers greeted her at the start and close of each day.

Even after medical procedures, she was known to show immediate trust with this keeper within the same day. Sam would look to him with the same steady confidence, her trust bank never truly depleted. This is an incredible sign of trust, as the "trust bank" built up between animals and keepers will often be depleted after a medical exam or procedure. You can think of this being similar to how your pet may be avoidant or less cooperative after a vet visit.

We often don't think about or overlook the bonds formed with species that may not be seen as the most "iconic", but that doesn't mean they aren't any less special or meaningful. Sam called to "her" keeper until the very end, chirping back to his voice even in her final moments. She was a partner in trust, a daily greeting, a steady presence, and a reminder that love can exist in the quietest of calls.

Saving a Piece of the World for its Wildlife

North Carolina Zoo Society
4403 Zoo Parkway
Asheboro, NC 27205
www.nczoo.com

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New N.C. Zoo Director Hired

When the Zoo's former Director, Pat Simmons, died last year, friends and staff mourned her loss. Meanwhile, staff had to begin the task of finding a new director with the experience, compassion, and foresight needed to keep the Zoo moving forward. With financial support from the North Carolina Zoological Society, the Zoo conducted an extensive nationwide search that culminated in the hiring of an internationally recognized leader in the world zoo and conservation community—Dr. Mark Penning.

Dr. Penning had worked for the Walt Disney Company for 24 years and recently retired from his position as vice president of animals, science, and environment for Disney Experiences. In that capacity, he led animal care, conservation, sustainability, and storytelling efforts at the company's Walt Disney World (including Animal Kingdom and Epcot), international parks, cruise lines, and consumer products.

Earlier in his career, he was the CEO of the South African Association for Marine Biological Research in Durban, South Africa. He also served as president of the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums and as a board member of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums. He is currently a member of the board of the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund International and a Trustee of Wild Welfare, an animal welfare organization.

Dr. Penning will begin his tenure at the Zoo on August 3, 2026. We are delighted to welcome him as our new director and look forward to building an even greater zoo under his leadership.

North Carolina ZOO
AND BOTANICAL GARDENS