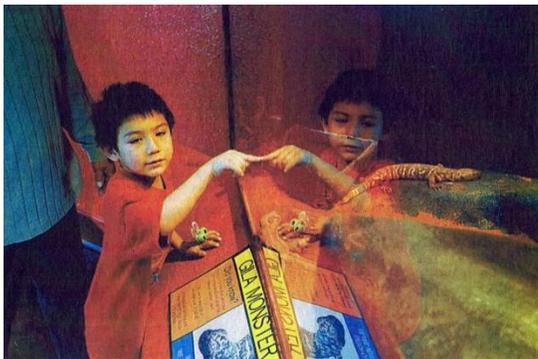


Navajo Zoo a 'Sanctuary for Nature and Spirit'

Weekend
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LEFT: Jonovan John looks at a Gila Monster display with his grandfather at the Navajo Nation Zoo on Tuesday, The Zoo will hold ZooFest May 2nd. **RIGHT:** A coyote paces in his cage at the Navajo Nation Zoo. [photos by Brian Leddy / Independent]

By Kathy Helms
Diné Bureau

WINDOW ROCK – For the second year in a row the Navajo Nation Zoo will celebrate ZooFest, a free day of fun for family members of all ages.

The event begins at 9 a.m. May 2 and features food, games, door prizes, face painting, inflatable slides, guest speakers and more. The only tribal zoo in the country, the Navajo Nation Zoo has just completed a \$25,000 renovation.

Matthew Holdgate, curator, said work is being completed on an indoor multi-species exhibit featuring a waterfall and species one might find in the back yard – rabbits, chipmunks, and prairie dogs for starters – tucked amid native plants. A video monitor features a Navajo storyteller talking about the animals and their relation to Navajo culture and traditions.

Indoor exhibits feature everything from the bug wall to the Lizard Lounge to snakes and skunks. “Originally when the zoo was built, it was probably one of the best zoos in the country since it incorporated all the natural rock formations and all the live plants,” Holdgate said. Founded in 1962, the zoo serves as “a sanctuary for nature and spirit.”

Like people, each animal has a history, and all are at the zoo because they are unable to survive in the wild on their own. For example, “B.J.,” the bobcat was taken from the wild as a kitten to be raised as a pet. Once he began tearing apart the house, he ended up at the zoo. Because he never learned to hunt, his chances of survival on his own would be slim at best.

The majority of animals on exhibit are native to the Navajo Nation, though some have been donated by other zoos, including two Mexican gray wolves, “Rico” and “Esperanza,” who came from the Rio Grande Zoo in Albuquerque. Naturally timid, the wolves have the option to show themselves to visitors or to remain out of sight amid the rocks and trees. Zoo staff respect their privacy and give them that

opportunity.

“They're part of the Mexican wolf species survival plan. Some zoos help breed the wolves for release into the wild. We generally serve as a home for retired breeders,” Holdgate said. Many of the zoo's inhabitants have been hit by cars or have flown and landed on power lines and sustained injuries which make life outside of captivity impossible.

Napoleon, a 15-year-old cougar, and his partner Sophie were named by sponsors from the zoo's adopt-an-animal program.

“With our adoption program, you not only get your name on a plaque and help pay for the animal's food, but if they are a new animal that's never been adopted, the first person gets to choose a name,” Holdgate said. “We still have a lot of animals who need names.”

The fee is \$100 for a full year and the sponsor gets a certificate and framed photo of their animal, as well as their name on the plaque identifying the animal and recognition at ZooFest.

The black bear exhibit is unique in that the bears live outdoors where they actually can dig their own dens in the ground to hibernate during winter. “Other zoos have concrete floors so they bring their bears in for the winter,” Holdgate said, “but here they get to exhibit natural behaviors.”

The bears were orphaned when they were just cubs. “Their mother was hit by a car and the cubs were following behind. Zoo staff actually bottle fed and raised them from babies,” he said. Signs are evident of the dens they dug this past winter.

“They dig basically at an angle and then they flatten out a little. It's just enough room to fit a bear in. Usually in the winter when you come walking by, you'll see her snout sticking out just a little bit, keeping her nose out so she can know when it's feeding time,” Holdgate said of one of the bears.

“The wild bears will hibernate because of reduction in feed availability. If you feed them constantly they don't hibernate but they will dig a den and they'll still stay in the den pretty much all winter. We put the food outside the den and if you're here at the right time, you'll see a big paw come out and grab the food and pull it back into the den.”

One of the new favorites among zoo patrons is 2-year-old “Bobbie” the elk. Bobbie also is an orphan. “Allegedly someone found him alone and brought him to us,” Holdgate said. “But more likely the parents were finding food a ways off and were nervous because humans were there. We always tell everyone that if you come across a baby animal in the wild, it's best to leave them because chances are the parents are nearby waiting for you to leave.”

Just past the elk exhibit is an owl, two porcupines and the site of what is hoped to soon be an eagle sanctuary.

“We have the location and the expertise in animal care,” Holdgate said. All they're missing is the funding. With federal officials making sweeps in several states, confiscating eagle feathers, the eagle sanctuary would allow the Navajo Nation the opportunity to collect feathers and distribute them to tribal members without fear of confiscation.

“Right now there are only two tribes who have made this commitment: the Zuni Tribe and the Iowa Tribe of Oklahoma,” Holdgate said. The zoo now has two golden eagles, both of which were hit by cars and are unable to fly. With an eagle sanctuary, the zoo could provide a home to other injured bald and golden eagles which otherwise might have to be euthanized.