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Baby Animals Fascinate, Educate

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LEFT: A baby raccoon busies itself with pieces of apple Aug. 29 at the Navajo Nation Zoo in Window Rock. **RIGHT TOP:** A boy meets a mule deer fawn with a sniff and a touch Aug. 29 at the Navajo Nation Zoo in Window Rock. **RIGHT BOTTOM:** A child's hand reaches to touch a mule deer fawn at the Navajo Nation Zoo in Window Rock Aug. 29. A family found the deer unattended by its mother and brought it to the zoo and it was named "Bambi." (Times photo - Donovan Quintero)

By Cindy Yurth
Tséyi' Bureau

WINDOW ROCK — The baby animals at the Navajo Nation Zoo are cute, no doubt about it.

There's Bambi the fawn, who lets children fondle his oversized ears and feed him from a bottle.

There's Chewy, the teenage raccoon, perched precariously on the side of his water bowl to wash his food. And the 2-month-old ground squirrel with the funny tail.

But the zoo's baby animals, on display Aug. 29 and Sept. 7 for a special introduction, are also a cautionary tale. Most of the time, if you see a wild youngster that appears to be alone, you should leave it be, said Matthew Holdgate, the zoo's curator.

"In a lot of species, the mothers will leave their babies for up to a few hours while they forage for food," Holdgate said. "If you see a baby animal, chances are its mother is somewhere nearby – even if you don't see her."

The folks who found Bambi didn't know that, unfortunately, and brought him to the zoo. Once humans have touched a fawn, the mom won't usually take it back, so the zoo agreed to take him. And now he's so tame, "there's no way he would survive in the wild," Holdgate said.

On the plus side, that is how the zoo gets most of its animals – from people who find lost, orphaned or injured critters that are no longer suited for life in the wild.

The 4-month-old raccoon, for example, was an orphan found by the U.S. Department of Agriculture employees. The squirrel was saved from an attacking dog – hence his funny tail.

"If we can nurse them back to health and release them, that's our first choice," Holdgate said. "If not, they have a home here with us."

The baby animals didn't know it but, along with the 50-cent hot dogs, they were also serving a purpose: luring in young families in hopes they would contribute to the zoo's planned playground.

And 597 visitors showed up, about four times the previous Saturday's intake though still less than a typical mid-summer Saturday.

"We're trying to compete with the big zoos, but still be free (admission)," Holdgate explained. "They have train rides and water parks. But at least we can have a nice playground."

The zoo has already set aside \$20,000, which will order, ship and install some basic playground equipment.

But "the more we raise, the better we can make it," Holdgate said.

About \$100 was raised from donations Aug. 29, and another \$100, profit from the hot dogs, will also go towards the playground.

While visitors greeted the zoo's newest arrivals Aug. 29, it was also time to say goodbye to an old friend.

The zoo's venerable mountain lion, Napoleon, passed away Aug. 12 at the age of 17, six to nine years longer than he would have survived in the wild.

Napoleon had been at the zoo for 10 years after being trapped by Fish and Wildlife officials while roaming the streets of Tucson.

Nearly three-quarters of the way through the year, many zoo animals remain available for "adoption." Patrons "adopt" an animal by contributing \$100 towards its care and feeding.

If the animal is new, like the baby raccoon who was adopted Aug. 29, the adopter gets to name it. The ground squirrel is still up for grabs. The zoo is also accepting donations for its new scholarship program.

The baby animals were also on display on Monday.

The next big event will be "Boo at the Zoo" Oct. 30 and 31. Children will be able to make a mask of their favorite animal and trick-or-treat around the zoo.

Information: 928-871-6574 or www.navajozoo.org.