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# RECENT CHANGES AT AMERICA'S **First Zoo**

True to its mission to advance discovery of the natural world, Philadelphia continues to reinvent the zoo

BY ERIC KARLAN




**A** male lion defiantly stares out into the distance as his cub clings to its dying mother. Father and son mourn the fallen lioness, slain by an ill-intended arrow to her chest.

For more than 130 years, these majestic cats—a stone sculpture called *The Dying Lioness*—have been greeting visitors to the

Philadelphia Zoo. Like the Frank Furness-designed Victorian gatehouses behind them, the stone lions have remained fixtures at the zoo's entrance, where each year more than 1.2 million people pass through.

Arriving two years after the zoo first opened in 1874, the lion sculpture is a vivid reminder that the Philadelphia Zoo's primary





The zoo has three giraffes: a male, Gus, a female, Stella, and their offspring, Abigall, that was born on July 17, 2010. The keepers call her Abby, for short.

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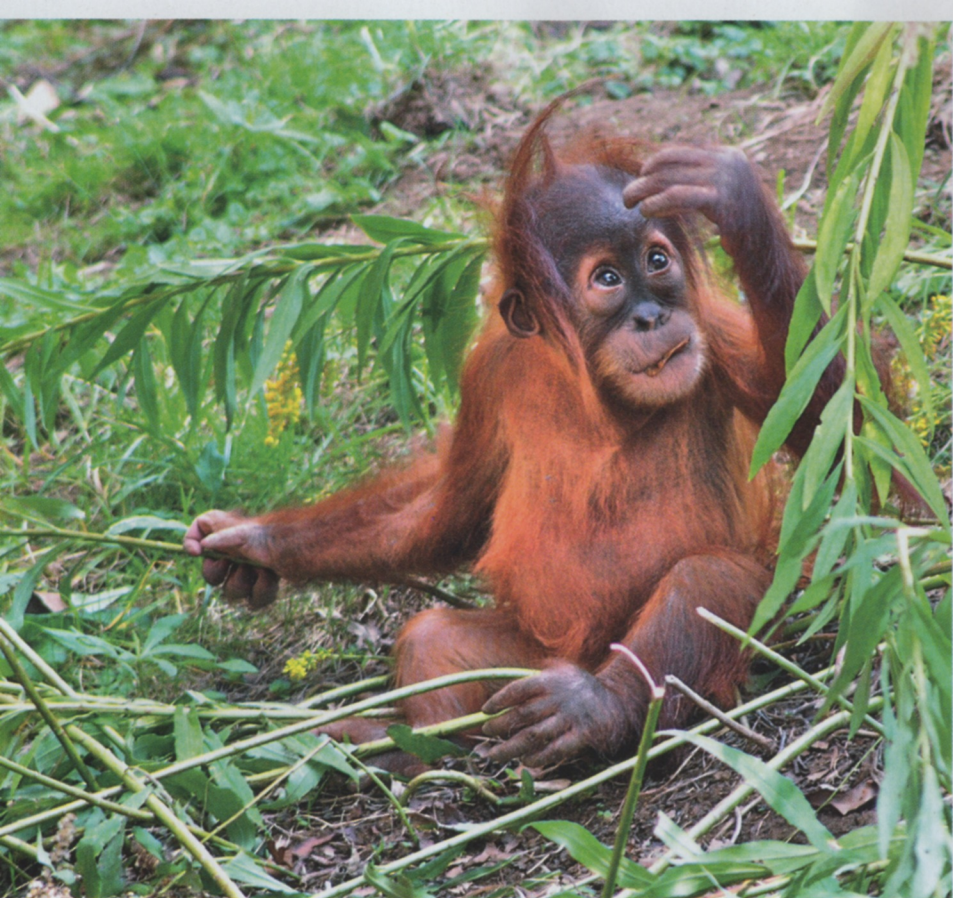
purpose was never solely to showcase exotic creatures through “compelling exhibition.”

On 42 acres of Fairmount Park, the zoo has steadfastly served its mission to “advance discovery, understanding and stewardship of the natural world” by adjusting and evolving its exhibits and activities over time to be a pioneer maintaining a wildlife sanctuary.

## A New Experience

Just a few hundred feet beyond *The Dying Lioness*, a herd of impala hovers permanently over a pool of water in yet another example of the dozens of animal statues beautifying the property. Climbing above the art, several species of monkeys and lemurs take turns navigating branches of the trees surrounding the pe-





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When the Philadelphia Zoo opened to exuberant fanfare in 1874, steamboats carried curious downtown residents up the Schuylkill River to a specially built dock.

rimeter of Impala Plaza. Unlike their sculpted counterparts in the fountain, these primates are living and breathing.

The monkeys captivating a gathering audience below serve as diplomats for some of the most threatened mammalian species on earth. They are the featured creatures in Treetop Trail, the zoo's latest pioneering project. A series of bridges and pathways enclosed within a 700-foot tube of flexible stainless-steel mesh is "reinventing the zoo experience for the 21st century, from both an animal and a visitor perspective," says Dana Lombardo, communications manager for the Philadelphia Zoo.

When a red-capped mangabey monkey, native to western Africa, emerged from its indoor enclosure into the summer air here for the first time last July, it marked the beginning of an intriguing new form of zoological interaction. The prototypical glass barrier between viewing gallery and conventional enclosure is not so much shattered, but rather transcended.

No longer are residents of the Rare Animal Conservation Center confined exclusively to staged habitats with unnaturally turquoise walls and terra-cotta tiled floors. Treetop Trail injects an unprecedented aura of authenticity into the zoo experience: as animals roam liberally in high branches and

elevated pathways, one cannot help but believe that perhaps this more closely resembles what occurs in the wild.

## America's First Zoo

Like so many things Philadelphia, the zoo at 34th Street and Girard Avenue was conceived in the spirit of innovative thinking. In an effort spearheaded by physician William Camac, local leaders sought to replicate on the North American conti-

nent the magnificent showcases of exotic animals already popular in prominent European cities in the mid 19th century. After the Zoological Society of Philadelphia received a state charter in 1859, it began a popular practice that led to the creation of more than 350 zoos across the United States.

The Philadelphia Zoo opened to exuberant fanfare on the first day of July in 1874. Steamboats carried curious downtown residents up the Schuylkill River to a specially built dock. With the completion of the Girard Bridge three days later, streetcars and horse and carriages soon made their way to the zoo as well.

By first year's end, 228,000 visitors had flocked to the zoo to marvel at 813 animals from around the world. Today, home to more than 300 species represented by over 1,300 animals, the Philadelphia Zoo remains the region's leading family attraction.

When you visit the zoo, reminders of a rich history are ever present. Visitors passing through the zoo turnstiles are promptly greeted by the Rare Animal Conservation Center, which in addition to endangered lemurs, fruit bats and naked mole rats, houses an exhibit tracing the zoo's past. Placards and displays commemorate momentous occasions at America's first zoo: the first-ever animal health center and laboratory opening in 1901;





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the first “zoocake,” a scientifically controlled diet, invented in 1935; and the first successful breeding of cheetahs in captivity in 1956, although the three cubs died shortly after birth.

Many features and accomplishments, however, are not as obvious. On the hillside between the flamingos and the kangaroos, for example, few people take notice of the white, colonial house known as “The Solitude,” which was constructed in 1784 by the grandson of William Penn. Within Big Cat Falls, which opened in 2006, is the old Big Cat House, where Philadelphia icon Rocky proposed to Adrienne in the titular movie franchise’s second film. Just a few hundred feet away, in a building once known as the Antelope House, children playing in an extravagant indoor tree house do not realize that the zoo’s first giraffes, deer and antelope all once lived under that very same roof.

In today’s modern zoo, such cramped living quarters will never be permitted again. Animal habitats are carefully crafted for each species, ensuring the most comfortable and natural environments possible. A specially constructed nocturnal exhibit completed in 2009 in the Primate Reserve allows visitors to see the elusive aye-aye, the world’s only nocturnal lemur and a threatened species endemic to Madagascar. Simulated thunderstorms douse the alligators and crocodiles each day at the Reptile and Amphibian House. In a separate room in the Small Mammal House, the lights are kept off during visiting hours to induce a nighttime atmosphere, thus providing guests the opportunity to watch such nocturnal species as the echidna, slow loris and vampire bat as they move about awake and active.

## The End of the Elephant

Increasingly stringent standards for habitats do come with a cost, however. The Philly zoo’s constricting quarter-acre yard

(far left) Sumatran orangutans Tua (female) and Sugi (male) are parents to Batu, a female born at the zoo on October 2, 2009. (middle) Galapagos tortoises can live to be over 100 years old, and the zoo has two, one that came to the zoo in 1932 and the other that arrived in 1956. (above) The new Treetop Trail allows the zoo’s monkeys to leave their four-walled enclosures and explore the zoo through a series of steel-mesh pathways and bridges.

and 1,800-square-foot barn were not sufficient space for four of the largest land animals on Earth to share. Public pressure from animal advocacy groups for an expanded territory, and the lack of funding for such an undertaking, forced the zoo to give up its prized pachyderms, some of the zoo’s most beloved attractions. In 2007, the Asian elephant, Dulary, went to the Elephant Sanctuary in Tennessee. Before the three African elephants were moved in 2009, Petal (52-years-old) died unexpectedly. The other two African elephants, Bette and Kallie, were relocated to the International Conservation Center in Somerset County, which Kallie has since left and is now at the Cleveland Metroparks Zoo.

Throughout its history, the Philadelphia Zoo has always adapted to achieve continued prosperity. When a 1995 fire in the World of Primates killed 23 animals, all of them endangered species, the zoo persevered by opening the Primate Reserve less than four years later. In the past year, the reserve has welcomed the births of an orangutan, a sifaka and a white-handed gibbon.

Meanwhile, in its perpetual quest to attain sustainability, conservation, and education, the zoo recently opened its third incarnation of a bird house. With several rooms to explore, the





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McNeil Avian Center features a tropical rainforest environment that allows visitors to walk among the feathered residents.

After the loss of the zoo's elephants, officials set into action a new strategic five-year plan, which will culminate with the completion of the new Hamilton Family Children's Zoo and Education Center by 2013. Honoring the Philadelphia Zoo's tradition begun in 1938 as the first zoo in North America to construct a space specifically geared toward children, the new center will incorporate modern technologies and experiences in the hope of instilling awareness and passion for conservation and the natural world in the youngest generations for years to come. Certainly, an apropos mission for the Philadelphia Zoo, which has often played a direct role in saving wildlife around the globe, including the rare Guam Micronesian kingfisher.

## The Survival of the Kingfisher

In a modest exhibit in the McNeil Avian Center, the male Guam Micronesian kingfisher turns his head from side to side on a small branch along the right wall. His female counterpart, distinguished by a white-feathered body contrasting his cinnamon plumage, perches on a higher branch. In spite of their inspirational story, these kingfishers are unassuming and often overlooked as visitors hastily rush to see lions and tigers and bears. Few pause long enough to realize that these birds are natural treasures—impossible to find in the wild and rarer than nearly all other living species on the planet.

This small subspecies of kingfisher once thrived in the tropical forest paradise of Guam, where it had no threats to its survival. When naval sailors passing through the small Pacific island inadvertently introduced the brown tree snake during World War II, the kingfisher's numbers plummeted. It took nearly 40 years for scientists to realize that the invasive population of

Lucha, a jaguar cub, rolls on the ground in his exhibit, Big Cat Falls. In addition to this cub, the zoo last year also welcomed two snow leopard cubs, one of which has since been relocated to another zoo.

snakes would soon eradicate this bird from our planet forever. An emergency rescue mission was conducted to save the last remaining members of the species.

Of the 29 birds rescued between 1984 and 1986, all but two were placed with the Philadelphia Zoo, where a rebreeding program has saved the species for almost three decades. The Guam Micronesian kingfisher remains extinct in the wild, but its survival in this zoo provides hope that it will one day be reintroduced to its native land.

At a time when headlines offer an unrelenting onslaught of ominous outlooks—global warming, mass extinctions, habitat destruction—the Philadelphia Zoo's success in saving the Guam Micronesian kingfisher provides living proof that the zoo's mission statement can be truly realized, and that we can all make a difference in healing Mother Earth—even if it is just one creature at a time. ♥

—Eric Karlan writes from Philadelphia.

## When You Go

The **Philadelphia Zoo** is located at the corner of 34th Street and Girard Avenue in Philadelphia's historic Fairmont Park. The zoo, which is just two miles from downtown Philadelphia, is accessible by car from the Schuylkill Expressway and by public bus and trolley. Open every day of the year except Thanksgiving, Christmas Eve and Day, and New Year's Eve and Day, the hours from March 1 through October 31 are 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Admission is adults, \$18; children ages 2 to 11, \$15; and children under 2 and members of the zoo, free. [philadelphiazoo.org](http://philadelphiazoo.org)