

## Greenville Zoo roars ahead with new exhibits, renewed focus

By Jay King, April 14, 2022



After two years of pandemic disruptions, the Greenville Zoo will greet anticipated record crowds this year with new animals, new exhibits and big plans for the future.

Zoo leaders say that with the lessons of the pandemic impressing into people's minds the interconnectedness and increasing fragility of the world, the zoo's mission to educate visitors and preserve species is more important than ever.

### Species survival

Long gone are the days when zoos were little more than menageries of caged animals and exhibits, zoo administrator Bill Cooper says. Instead, zoos are now integral in the ongoing battle to keep endangered species from extinction.

Nowhere is this more evident than with two of the zoo's newest additions, Jasper and Anastasia, two Amur leopards born in February 2020 to their mother, 12-year-old Jade.

Amur leopards are native to southeastern Russia and northwestern China and are critically endangered — only about 100 are in the wild and fewer than 300 remain, so the three at Greenville Zoo represent a vital link in the species' survival, Cooper says.

"That's why we do what we do," he says. "Our goal is to save species from extinction."

Amur leopards are among several species at the zoo that are under a Species Survival Plan through the Association of Zoos and Aquariums. As an AZA-accredited zoo (one of only three in South Carolina), Greenville Zoo is able to take part in crucial conservation steps such as the captive breeding program.

Animal care supervisor Greg Garcia says preserving genetic diversity is a key component of the captive breeding program. This is one reason the male cub, Jasper, is kept separate from his sister and mother.

This is also why the addition of a new holding area and day room to the leopard exhibit was one of the most important projects completed in the past two years. The day room gives visitors the chance to view the leopards when they're not in their outdoor habitat.

## **Making connections**

Giving guests the opportunity to forge a connection with the animals is central to the zoo's educational mission, Cooper says.

"We want to bring people and animals as close as we can," he says. "That interaction helps [people] to care about these animals."

Deeper, more meaningful interaction is the reason behind the zoo's next capital project, a giraffe feeding platform, according to Greenville Zoo Foundation executive director Lydia Thomas. The project is expected to cost about \$350,000 with construction lasting about 12 months, depending on how quickly the fundraising goal is met.

She says the new platform will give visitors an opportunity to engage "face-to-face" with the zoo's three Masai giraffes. Declared endangered in 2019 and native to southern Kenya and Tanzania, there are less than 35,000 left in the wild.

Greenville's giraffes are something of internet celebrities, thanks to the zoo's [live camera feeds](#) of their living areas via EarthCam. The birth in February 2021 of a healthy female calf, Providence, drew avid followers from around the world with a particular concentration of fans in Germany, says Thomas.

The addition of a feeding deck overlooking the giraffe habitat will give visitors the chance to interact with Providence, her mother, Autumn, and the zoo's 14-year-old male, Miles.

Cooper says offering such interactive experiences will help reach new generations of potential animal advocates and patrons.

"There's no zoo without community," he says.

## **Species spotlight: Masai giraffes**

The Greenville Zoo has three Masai giraffes: a female, Autumn, her 13-month-old calf, Providence; and a 13-year-old male, Miles.

The giraffes are among the zoo's most popular animals for visitors. Autumn, Providence and Miles are also internet celebrities thanks to the zoo's live camera feeds powered by EarthCam.

Masai giraffes are native to southern Kenya and Tanzania and were declared endangered in 2019 after their populations decreased by as much as 40% in the past 30 years.

According to zookeeper Sasha Zalinsky, Miles is very sociable and enjoys interacting with people, probably because he was hand-reared and associates people with food.

**Giraffe fun fact:** Despite having a neck that can weigh as much as 600 pounds and reach lengths beyond eight feet, giraffes have the same number of vertebrae as humans — seven.

## **Species spotlight: Sumatran orangutan**

There are three Sumatran orangutans at the Greenville Zoo: a female, Lana; a male, Kumar; and their daughter, Adira, born at the zoo in August 2018.

Sumatran orangutans are critically endangered in their native Sumatra. They are one of several species at the zoo that are part of a captive breeding program as part of a Species Survival Plan under the auspices of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums.

Zookeeper Melody Tucker says orangutans are an arboreal species, meaning they spend much of their life cycle in trees. They typically live about 60 years, and for 37-year-old Lana to give birth, it was equivalent to the same concerns a 50-year-old woman would face at delivery. Tucker says this is why Adira was delivered by cesarean section.

## **Species spotlight: Amur leopards**

There are three Amur leopards at the zoo: a 12-year-old female, Jade; and her two offspring born in 2020, a male, Jasper, and a female, Anastasia.

The cubs' sire, Nelkan, was sent to the Philadelphia Zoo temporarily until the cubs reach adulthood. Jasper and Anastasia are the second pair of cubs born to Jade and Nelkan as part of a Species Survival Plan for the critically endangered cats.

With fewer than 100 Amur leopards left in the wild and only about 165 being cared for in captivity, Greenville Zoo's success in its

captive breeding program is a significant achievement in preventing the animals from going extinct, according to administrator Bill Cooper.

Amur leopard fun fact: Like most cats, wild and domestic, Amur leopards sleep a lot — up to 16 hours a day.

### **Greenville Zoo fast facts**

- The zoo covers 14 acres in downtown Greenville and is home to more than 200 animals representing 79 species.
- The zoo is owned by the City of Greenville and operates as an Enterprise Fund with an annual operating budget of about \$3.5 million.
- An average of about 300,000 people visit the zoo each year and about 60,000 students participate in educational programs
- The zoo is among only 10% of the 2,500 facilities licensed by the federal government to house exotic animals to meet the stringent requirements for accreditation through the American Association of Zoos and Aquariums. The zoo has held this accreditation since 1995.
- The Greenville Zoo Foundation was created in 1975 to provide financial, resource and advocacy support for the zoo. To learn more, visit [greenvillezoofoundation.org](http://greenvillezoofoundation.org).

### **Upcoming zoo events:**

- Green Tie Gala — April 22
- Brew in the Zoo — May 20
- Sippin' Safari — Sept. 9
- Boo in the Zoo — Oct. 13-16, 20-23, 27-30
- Zoom Through the Zoo (5K race and kids fun run) — Nov. 19
- Holidays at the Zoo — Dec. 16-30 (closed Dec. 24, 25)

### **Zoo milestones**

- 1960 — Cleveland Park zoo opened with native animals
- 1985 — First Boo at the Zoo; education center opens as part of zoo's master plan
- 1995 — \$2.5 million raised through Zoo 2000 fundraising campaign, funds new alligator, orangutan, leopard, primate and giraffe exhibits
- 2003 — new orangutan and leopard exhibits completed
- 2008 — new giraffe exhibit completed
- 2015 — a worldwide internet audience of nearly one million watch the live birth of a giraffe calf
- 2020 — zoo closed for several months due to pandemic; veterinary hospital renovated upgraded
- 2021 — Holidays at the Zoo opens for first time; new Amur leopard dens completed

### **Endangered species fast facts:**

As of 2020, there are 3,005 animal species listed as critically endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature.

- 203 mammal species are facing extinction
- 31 mammal species are listed as possibly extinct
- 60 mammal subspecies are listed as critically endangered
- 12 of the 79 species represented at the Greenville Zoo are endangered or critically endangered