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exploring Oklahoma

This is a place where porcupines are sociable and snakes are huggable. Where lynxes are pettable and kangaroos are approachable. This is a different breed of zoo—the Little River Zoo in Norman.

A Small Zoo with a Big Heart

When you first visit the Little River Zoo, its simplicity takes you by surprise. Right away you notice that there are no paved walkways, amusement park rides, or elaborate animal enclosures. You might even describe it as a backwoods zoo; after all, it's situated on 55 forested acres. But then you are greeted by a volunteer who invites you to join a personally guided tour, and suddenly the small zoo with a big heart exceeds your expectations. But wait, there are more surprises waiting around the bend.

Spit Happens!

Perhaps the most unique feature of the Little River Zoo is its hands-on approach to many of the animals. The petting zoo houses llamas, pot bellied pigs, sheep, pygmy goats, giant Flemish rabbits, ducks, and, in warmer months, tortoises. Most of the zoo's inhabitants are either cast-off pets or rescued animals. So watch out—the sign on the llama cage, "Spit Happens," is no joke. Thankfully, the restrooms are located nearby.

Care to pet a more exotic animal? Your tour guide may put Bonnie, the European lynx, on a leash, or uncage Sonya, the red-tailed boa constrictor.

Foxes and Monkeys and Bears, Oh My!

During the remainder of your 90-minute to two-hour tour, you'll enjoy a good view of a variety of enclosed animals. Of particular interest are the Capuchin monkeys, fennec foxes, red kangaroos, African crested porcupines, North American black bears, and Southern bobcats. Expect your



tour guide to be ready and eager to answer questions. After all, as Cris Bell, Director of PR and Marketing, put it, "You're much more likely to care about the survival of an animal after you get up close and personal with it."

Spring Break Junior Zookeeper Program

While the everyday visitor to the zoo has access to many animals, Little River Zoo's Junior Zookeeper (JZK) Program offers even more. Open to children ages 6-15, the program is a great opportunity for kids interested in understanding what it means to be a real zookeeper. What exactly do the kids learn? According to one junior zookeeper, "I learned how to scoop poop! It was smelly, but to leave it in the animal's pen would have been gross." Another participant said, "I learned that porcupines can't shoot their quills. It would be scary if they could."

The porcupines are sure to be a spine-tingling attraction at this year's Spring Break Junior Zookeeper Program. "Mary and Lee are the elder, and very pugnacious, porcupines," said Bell. "They live separately because they are not nice with people." However, Mary and Lee's offspring are a different matter.

A Different Breed of Zoo

Patiently hand-raised and bottle fed from birth, the youngsters are eventually tame enough to be walked on a leash. Can these porcupines be petted? "Sure," Bell says, "but only on their heads."

This year's Spring Break JZK Program, which costs \$80 and runs from 10am-4pm March 16-18, will focus on animal survivor skills. In addition to

walking the porcupines, junior zookeepers will feed the red kangaroos, learn about the team-player habits of wolves, hide Easter egg treats for the Capuchin monkeys, and observe the underground burrowing skills of the fennec foxes. The three-day program fills up quickly and is limited to 40 participants. All activities are closely supervised by an experienced adult zookeeper.

Pride Rock and the Reptile Room

Spring Break isn't the only time when aspiring young zookeepers can gain valuable hands-on experience with animals in their natural habitat. Little River Zoo has monthly JZK activities scheduled. Events include Saturday JZK programs (\$40), overnight campouts/scavenger hunts (\$55), and weeklong summer camps (\$100).

Two favorite JZK destinations, Pride Rock and the Reptile Room, are off limits (aka, "Parents, Keep Out!") to the ordinary zoo visitor. Pride Rock, a nature hike away from the main zoo grounds, is a sandstone retreat for zookeepers in training and the occasional horned toad on siesta. The Reptile Room is the residence of embraceable iguanas, boas, bearded dragons, and an albino python.

Huggable snakes and lizards?

It's enough to make you wonder if these are a different breed of reptiles—just like the zoo they call home.

Plan Your Visit

Little River Zoo: just south of Highway 9 on 120th Avenue, 366-7229, LittleRiverZoo.com. Open daily from 10am-5pm. Admission is \$6 for adults, \$4 for children 3-11, and free for children under 2. Feed for the petting zoo costs \$1. **MFM**

Lori Williams is a freelance writer who specializes in writing about international adoption and the special needs child. Lori resides in Bethany with her husband Dean and daughter Aurelia.

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