

The Zoo is cool again, folks.

- by Cynthia Hall for Hometown News
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MELBOURNE – Unbeknownst to most, our friendly, neighborhood zoo recently ranked fifth in the nation according to USA Today's 10 Best List, quite a remarkable feat for a "small-town" zoo, beating out larger establishments in loftier locales.

In all fairness, however, it's not surprising to see why. Join me as we take a stroll through this hidden gem that calls Brevard home.

Cleverly situated away from the hubbub of town at the corner of Murrell and N. Wickham Road, you realize within minutes that Brevard Zoo is one of a kind.

With a Zen-like approach to wildlife conservation & education, you're immediately transported near and far via meandering pathways, shielded from the elements beneath an impressive array of flora and fauna. As you twist and turn through inviting alcoves and various passages, you happen upon a multitude of animal habitats that blend seamlessly with the environment.

You'll come across creatures such as the inquisitive meerkat and the two-horned rhinoceros, both native to Africa. The family of giraffes are ever-popular and feeding them never gets old, but those encounters merely scratch the surface of experiences at your literal fingertips.

An inconsequential right turn may usher you toward enchanting bonsai trees in the Celebration Garden, as it leads you toward the edge of a koi-filled pond. Perhaps you'll veer left instead and spot a life-size backdrop of splendid parrot wings, perfect for a Snapchat, Instagram, or old-fashioned family portrait.

If stewardship rings your bell, then a visit to Restore Our Shoreline - dedicated to conserving and protecting the Indian River Lagoon - will surely inspire you.

The 2,400 square-foot Sea Turtle Healing Center is of particular pride, able to provide the Sea Turtle Preservation Society a place to nurse injured or sick turtles found on our local beaches. The Center isn't open to the public for the safety of the animals, but you can learn about their work via educational displays and programs held at the zoo throughout the year.

The Brevard Zoo motivates you to do more, see more, and then supplies you with the opportunity to act on it. You can become one with nature on a guided kayak tour of restored wetlands or partake in a myriad of feeding encounters.

“We have a new electric train ride for families to enjoy,” said Keith Winsten, Executive Director. “Purchased before the pandemic, the train offers larger compartments and a smoother ride.” The zoo is also in the process of rotating the animals in the train loop. “You might see zebras one day and rhinos the next,” continued Mr. Winsten, “But keep a lookout for our newest hoof residents, a male bongo and three Ankole-Watusi.”

But wait, there's more!

The around-the-world-in-80-days experience includes an unapologetic look at our fair state, front and center. Wild Florida reminds you of our rich and diverse ecosystem, and the importance of protecting its inhabitants, like the ancient alligator, frolicking sea otter, or the recent addition of two rescued Florida bears.

And we're not done yet! The newest and still growing exhibit is Rainforest Revealed, serving to help you understand this complex world through the vibrancy of the macaw, the peculiarity of the tamarind, and the endearing two-toed sloth.

Is that a strange insect you hear? No, those are zipliners overhead zipping along their own adventure at Tree-Top Trek (separate fee), watching you watch the animals in a comical life imitates art imitates life kind of way.

The award winning Paws-On exhibit is for the young and young-at-heart. It's not to be overlooked with yet another layer of hands-on fun including a splash-zone, aquarium, jungle gym and additional learning displays.

As can be expected, the Brevard Zoo suffered during the COVID lockdown, with the added concern of maintaining the care of its animals and staff.

The zoo decided to tackle the situation with tactical determination. Through dedicated capital funding, they were able to expand the parking lot and upgrade the bathrooms while closed to the public.

"Although we had to reduce salaries, hours, and cut some positions, we fared better than expected by securing PPP monetary assistance," said Mr. Winsten. However, reopening in June with a 50% drop in attendance is worrisome to say the least.

"We pivoted to quality online educational programming and we've received rave reviews, really mastering the technology for those experiences," said Mr. Winsten, "And we've taken great care to maintain a safe environment for our guests and staff including online timed ticketing, mask requirements, proper social distancing, and suspension of indoor activities."

Looking to the future they're cautious, but hopeful as they continue to expand Rainforest Revealed and work to secure a new lion exhibit in 2021! But as an independent zoo - not a part of a government body or unionized - volunteers play a huge role.

There are hundreds of volunteer opportunities, ages 16+, encompassing areas from animal care, to horticultural needs, or working with the public. There's surely a good fit for anyone interested in getting involved.

There are a thousand different options to donate as well, through memberships, symbolic adoptions, etc. But Mr. Winsten stresses that the best way to donate is by visiting the zoo. "Please come," he humbly implores. "Engage with our staff, experience the animals, and take part in our activities."

As the brainchild of the East Coast Zoological Society over 25 years ago, the Brevard Zoo was envisioned to serve as a conservation hub where people of all ages could gather and learn about animals and nature through education and participation. I'm sure you'd agree they've lived up to their expectations.

Rest assured, the zoo is cool again.

For more information, please contact Elliot Zirulnik, Communications Manager at 321-254-9453 ext. 236, or visit their informative website at www.brevardzoo.org.

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