

# 2023 in Review at the Zoo

Dec 29, 2023



2023 was a busy year for Sedgwick County Zoo. From record attendance in events, animal transfers and births, there was always something new happening at the Zoo.

So, let's look back at 2023 month by month with Scott Newland, SCZ's President and CEO. And to cap things off, we'll look ahead at 2024.

## JANUARY

2023 started off on a low note.

In December 2022, infant chimpanzee Kucheza tragically passed away from head trauma. While the Zoo and primate team were still in mourning over his passing, Orangutan Daisy, a longtime resident of the Zoo, also passed. Later that month, Chimpanzee Bea experienced complications with her pregnancy, resulting in her infant not surviving.

"That started off the year, not on a high note," Newland said.

The outpouring of support from the community as Sedgwick County Zoo processed all these losses was incredibly touching. The community was able to connect with one another mourn all these losses together.

January also marked the beginning of breeding season for the Humboldt penguins.

Black Bear Mitch also celebrated his 20th birthday in January, celebrating with watermelon and grape snacks, as well as a birthday banner.



## FEBRUARY

February brought the announcement of the Tropics re-opening due to the threat of HPAI decreasing.

The elephant team also conducted a semen collection in order to help increase the African Elephant population. This semen was transferred to other Zoo facilities for artificial insemination.

"We transferred samples to the Hogle Zoo," Newland said. "That was just one of several semen transfers that we did in '23 to help support the African elephant population."

The Zoo bid farewell to Boomer the bison, who passed away.

Dr. Greg Rasmussen, Founder and Director of the Painted Dog Research Trust, visited Sedgwick County Zoo. This trust works to research and protect African Painted Dogs in the wild.



## MARCH

In March, Stingray Cove re-opened. After several months in an off-site facility, the weather finally warmed up enough to welcome back the stingrays and sharks.

In this month, SCZ also hosted the Association of Zoos and Aquariums pre-conference tour.

"The AZA Mid-Year Conference was in Oklahoma City, and we hosted a daylong event here at the Zoo prior to the conference starting. It was a good day; it was a lot of fun," Newland said. "The reason that's significant is a lot of people in AZA don't make it out here to Wichita to see our facility. So, when they do, we always have a really good time with those folks. And I always think people are very surprised when they come here. It's not that they have low expectations, I just don't think they know what to expect. And we always seem to kind of blow those expectations out of the water once they once they leave."



## APRIL

April brought Margarita, the Zoo's Agave Americana. This "century plant" began blooming, shooting off a stalk. From March 16 to March 31, she grew 62 inches, averaging a 4-inch growth per day.

She was quickly relocated from the green house to a public area due to her outgrowing the green house. Blooming is the final part of the Agave's lifecycle before dying.

Carlos the Mongoose Lemur turned 32 on April 10, making him one of the oldest known mongoose lemurs. On average, these lemurs live to be 20 at the oldest.

The Zoo wrapped up the month with its Earth Day celebration, Party for the Planet. The event was a success, reminding everyone that when we all work together, we can make a real positive impact on the earth's environment.



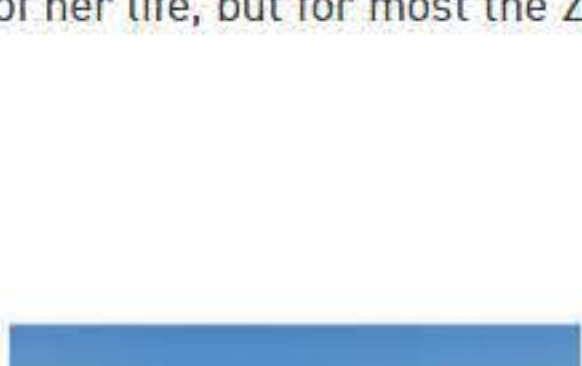
## MAY

May brought the arrival of African Elephant Callee. Brought in from Omaha's Henry Doorly Zoo, the hope was that Callee would aid in the elephant reproduction efforts at Sedgwick County Zoo.

This month also brought updates to animal habitats.

"In May, we had finished up most of the expansion for maned wolves and anteaters. The building was all done, we were doing the landscaping, so we were probably trying to push to be ready for the summer," Newland said. "We made some updates to Mexican wolf yard and the rhino habitat floor, which were huge husbandry additions."

Sadly, as May came to a close the Zoo announced the passing of hippopotamus Pudgie. At 50 years old, she was one of the oldest animals at the Zoo and had called SCZ home not just for most of her life, but for most the Zoo's life.



## JUNE

June was full of festivities at the Zoo.

From Pride month and Riverfest to Chimps and Salsa, almost every weekend in June hosted a special event.

This year's Father's Day Car show was the most heavily attended yet, with more than 9,000 guests attending. The Zoo also partnered with other area attractions for the third year in a row to promote Sunflower Summer, an app that allowed free visits to museums, zoos, and historical locations state-wide.

"We are very excited to be partnering with Sunflower Summer," Newland said. "I think it's an excellent program."





## JULY

July brought the launching of the Zoo's podcast, The Sedgwick County ZooCast.

Zookeeper Appreciation Week occurs in July. This year the Zoo highlighted zookeepers across departments. From ectotherms to birds, mammals to commissary, it takes the hard work and dedication of many people to keep the Zoo running. Without their hard work, there would be no Zoo.

Twilight Tuesdays in July allowed guests to visit the Zoo during the cooler evening hours. With discounted admission and live musical performances each week, Twilight Tuesday was a great way to wind down for the day.



## AUGUST

August brought the hatching of a Cape Coral Cobra. Native to Southern Africa, this is the third year in a row the ectotherm team at SCZ has successfully bred these snakes.

Chimpanzee Alizeti was also born in August. The outpouring of support for her online and in person has been staggering, with dedicated fans following along with every step in her development.

In August, Margarita reached the final step in her blooming. After being moved to a new location, she finally fell over. When an agave plant finishes growing its stalk, it finally blooms, producing offspring.



## SEPTEMBER

September kicked off with the Wildest night in Wichita, Zoobilee.

This year was the biggest party yet, with more than 6,000 guests in attendance.

September also had huge conservation developments with the birth of Poki, the Guam Kingfisher. These birds are extinct in the wild, and Poki was the first Guam Kingfisher to successfully hatch at Sedgwick County Zoo.

This month also marked the end of African Elephant Ajani's time at SCZ. He transferred to the Toledo Zoo in Ohio based on a recommendation from the African Elephant Species Survival Plan.

"He's doing well," Newland said. "He has adjusted there and has mixed in with their herd very well."



## OCTOBER

In October, the Zoo's ectotherm team successfully hatched a McCord's Box Turtle. These turtles have not been seen in the wild for more than a decade, and the successful hatching was a huge achievement in animal conservation.

This month also had the announcement of two elephant pregnancies. Talia and Simunye were confirmed to be pregnant, with due dates in early 2025.

Guests journeyed through the looking glass at Wild Lights in October. For the third year, SCZ hosted this lantern festival. With never-before-seen lanterns based on Lewis Carol's "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland," guests were amazed and delighted by the displays.

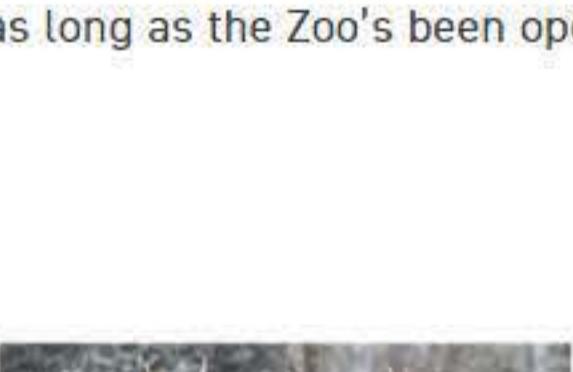
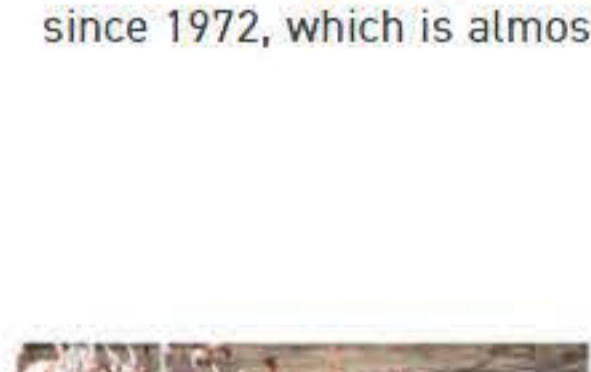


## NOVEMBER

In November, birds were moved off exhibit to protect them from contracting Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza from wild birds.

November had the first snowfall of the year, allowing the animals to play in a wintery wonderland.

Sweetie Pie the hippo also celebrated her 52nd birthday. She's called SCZ home since 1972, which is almost as long as the Zoo's been open.



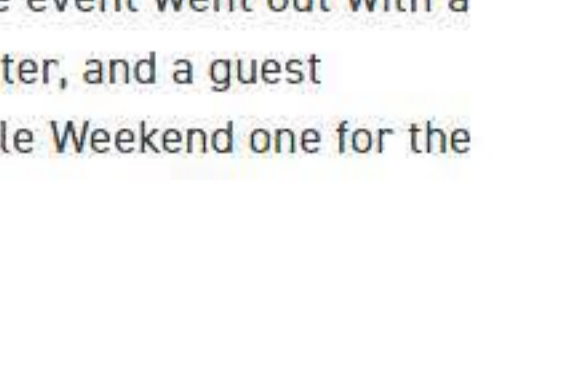
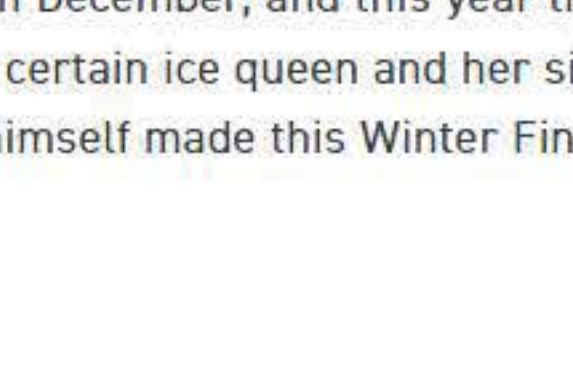
## DECEMBER

In December, bull elephants Callee and Titan were given access to the same yard for the first time. This will allow them to build a positive social bond, and will also allow Titan to learn from older male Callee.

Surprisingly, a seed pod was found on the remains of Margarita the agave. After some TLC, the pod has begun to sprout, meaning that hopefully Margarita's legacy will continue with the growth of this new century plant.

In December, the Zoo was saddened to announce the passing of Black Bear Mitch. He was twenty at the time of his passing and will be missed by zookeepers and zoo guests alike.

Wild Lights came to a close in December, and this year the event went out with a bang. Carolers, visits from a certain ice queen and her sister, and a guest appearance by Santa Claus himself made this Winter Finale Weekend one for the books.





# HIGHS AND LOWS

When looking back at 2023, Newland said the highlight of the year for him was the AZA Pre-Conference Tour.

"Getting folks out here to see us, that was a huge highlight for me," Newland said.

He is hopeful that in the future Sedgwick County Zoo could host the conference, but the city would need to make some infrastructure changes before that could happen.

"We can't host an AZA conference; we do not meet AZA's criteria to be a conference host. And the only part of that criteria that we don't meet is the convention center itself. We do not have a big enough space for all the breakout meetings that 3,500 Zoo professionals need for a conference," Newland said. "So, the only way we get our colleagues to come see our place is with these special things. And so that was very significant to me, because it has been a long time since we've had a platform to share our Zoo with AZA."

The low-point of the year was the sheer number of deaths at the Zoo.

Sedgwick County Zoo has been around for more than 50 years, and many of the animals in the Zoo's care have been here for decades. A large percentage of the animals at the Zoo are geriatric.

"That's a tough one. And it's tough, because it's going to be tough on your teams and you're not sharing good news to the public," Newland said. "I think that that would probably be the one thing that I would point to that just brought everybody down this year."

But the Zoo had many small victories throughout the year. Newland's favorite of those? Margarita the Agave.

"I absolutely was blown away by how the public responded to Margarita. Not that they shouldn't be excited about how cool of a plant Margarita was, but I just was surprised at how much they got behind that story," Newland said. "I just think the whole thing showed a new level of how we can engage our citizens here in town. And I think the culmination of the story- I am blown away that they have sprouts from those seeds. That is really cool that she's sprouted those. That was to me, the completely out of left field feel good story for this year."



# LOOKING AT 2024

What's going to be new at Zoo in 2024?

Hopefully, updates in animal pregnancies and births. All of the animals that had Species Survival Program breeding recommendations in 2023 will have them in 2024 as well.

"We have gotten recommendations to bring in new gorillas," Newland said.

The hope is that with adjustments to the gorilla troops with the addition of a few new members, the gorillas will be able to successfully breed.

Currently, four of the African elephants at SCZ, Simunye, Talia, Xolani, and Arusi, are pregnant. These pregnancies are the result of a recommendation through the SSP. Throughout 2024, zookeepers will continue to monitor their status as we prepare for their 2025 due dates.

Sedgwick County Zoo will also be preparing for its 2025 AZA inspection. Every five years, accredited zoos are required to undergo an inspection by fellow zoo professionals to maintain their accreditation.

"The big thing for the Zoo, is just that it is going to be the year before our accreditation inspection. So, '24 is going to bring a lot of just getting the Zoo ready for all of that, which actually won't take a lot," Newland said. "I love that, for the most part, we're accreditation-ready every day. I wouldn't be scared if the accreditation team showed up tomorrow. I think we're still in really good shape."

As we look back on 2023, we can mourn our losses and celebrate our victories together as a community. And we can all enter 2024 having learned from everything 2023 taught us, confident that the next year will be even better than the last.