

Meet one of the Education Department's most talkative members – Sue the African Gray Parrot

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It's not just people that work at the Sedgwick County Zoo. Some of the members of the education department are of the furry and feathered variety.

While all the animals at the Zoo are ambassadors for their wild counterparts, the animal ambassadors in the Education department are a little different.

"We have about 35 or 40 ambassadors. And they are from all the taxa. So, fish, birds, mammals, invertebrates, reptiles, and amphibians. They're all well represented," Interpretive Manager Kara King said. "They live here in the education department so that they can be easily accessed. So that we can take them to other locations without any fear of bringing in zoonotic diseases to the larger population. Basically, they're living away from that larger population so that they can have interactions with the public."

The animal ambassadors' job is to help create empathy and make a connection with people. When you're able to get up close and interact with an animal, you can better understand its importance and the importance of all animals.



Sue, the African Gray Parrot

"People know about animals. I mean, nurseries are filled with pictures of animals. So, there are deep connections from the onset," King said. "This just helps bridge some of that gap just by giving people the opportunity to see them. Sometimes touching them- that's not always guaranteed. But they're always going to experience them and ask questions about them and learn more."

These animal ambassadors make appearances at education classes at the Zoo, allowing children and adults alike a unique learning experience. They also frequently travel off-site to places like schools and retirement homes. But these animals don't become ambassadors overnight, it takes time and training before they're ready to aid in teaching.

African Gray Parrot Sue is an animal ambassador in training.

"She is very smart. She seems pretty intuitive about our moods as well. Loves reactions," King said. "She's ornery, she's really ornery. In true parrot fashion, you have to keep your eyes on her."

Sue came to SCZ in 2022 from Nebraska. She, along with many other animals, had been seized from an unhealthy environment and taken into the Nebraska Humane Society in order to be rehomed.

"They're long lived. A lot of reptiles and birds are very long lived. People get these animals and bring them into their lives when they're younger, but situations change. And you really have to be prepared for that commitment," King said. "And then providing the proper care is so difficult. Sorting through what is valid husbandry and care information is so difficult. I don't think that the majority of this is happening because people don't care, it's just that they don't know."



Sue receives a scratch

Sue's exact age is unknown, but she is a mature female. And she's smart as well, greeting people with a "good morning" when they approach her, and telling them "bye-bye" when they leave.

"She is very conversational. She talks a lot, has a huge vocabulary," King said. "She told us her name. I mean, we didn't name her."

She's an intuitive bird who quickly picks up on others' moods. She loves to explore her environment and one of her favorite activities is shredding paper. She's also a dancer and will bob her head up and down.

"She's extremely curious, an extremely intelligent bird. She's always watching, seeing what's going on. She's talking nonstop. She's learning how to count," Education Specialist Joe McDowell said. "She is just talkative. She gets a lot of FOMO; she just wants to be part of the action."

Sue isn't quite ready to make her teaching debut. The education department is working with her being more relaxed around new people, as well as training certain behaviors. Currently, she's working on standing on perches.

"The main thing I practice with her is stepping up on a branch or a stick," McDowell said. "And then we have a larger perch-like structure that we'll put her on and she can kind of hang out on there, and I'll have her step up on the branch, and then I'll have her step back on her the structure, have her step back on the branch. So, kind of that back and forth."



McDowell rewards Sue with a scratch for successfully stepping onto her branch

And what is Sue's reward for successfully stepping up on the branch? She's trained through positive reinforcement. A verbal "Good Girl, Sue" is her main form of reinforcement, but on occasion she'll also receive a carrot or a peanut.

The Education Department is hopeful that within six months, Sue will be ready to make her animal ambassador debut.

"If you don't care about something it's not going to be in the forefront of your mind to take care of it. But if we can create these personal connections, these empathetic connections, then we can get people out there recycling, and doing river cleanups, doing all of these things that are conservation minded, which is our mission," King said. "Because they make friends with an animal ambassador and they're able to bridge some of that gap and capture that interest in a way that our words may not be able to."