

'LEAPS AND BOUNDS' Community Foundation helps fuel zoo's growth

By Julianne Endres

Watertown Area Community Foundation

The Bramble Park Zoo has been growing in more ways than one for a long time. "I've been here 31 years," said Dan Miller, executive director. "In that time, we've grown by leaps and bounds."

That continuing growth has a lot to do with the Foundation's partnership with the Lake Area Zoological Society throughout the years. To date, roughly \$590,000 has been awarded in grants to the zoo: \$516,498 by the Foundation Board; \$44,238 by Women & Giving; \$17,500 by the Youth Council; and \$8,732 from Giving Back 365 donors.

Some early grants that many residents may have forgotten about include: support for an interpretive graphics and beehive display, a deer building and several small animal exhibits at the zoo. Even a new zoo entrance, including the Discovery Center, was supported by the Foundation in 1997.

Some of the first zoo outreach programs for local children were supported by the Foundation. That support continues today, especially through Women & Giving support of the Girls Rule Roots & Shoots programs

and Wildlife Warriors supported by Giving Back 365. Other educational projects and programs at the zoo have included: Promethean Activclassroom (interactive electronic activboard), a "Waters of South Dakota" exhibit, support of the Terry Redlin Environmental Center and the Diversity of Life/Discovery Center exhibits. It has all been part of "coming closer." Youths and visitors come closer by hands-on learning experiences at the zoo.

The span of 2005-2007 brought with it Foundation support of the jaguar renovation, a "Waters of South Dakota" exhibit and the artificial life-size eagle's nest that children continue to love climbing into.



Watching otters has become a normal occurrence at Bramble Park Zoo.

What do a Blazing Star and an Aster have in common? They are among the many plants and flowers native to South Dakota that are featured in the zoo's prairie gardens. Not everyone gets the opportunity to come that close to these plants in their own backyard. The Blazing Star also brings one closer to the Monarch butterflies which it attracts. The Foundation has provided ongoing support of the prairie gardens at the zoo.

The Foundation has supported the jaguar, tiger, penguin (now discontinued) and bear exhibits. These exhibits all offer the zoo visitor the opportunity to get as close as possible to the animals. Most have glass windows which really bring you face to face.

The Youth Council has also supported a free day at the zoo several times over the years.

Ottertown became a reality in 2014. The Foundation supported the exhibit with a multi-year \$150,000 grant. "One of my favorite grants is Ottertown," Miller said. "I think it's the most popular exhibit at the zoo."

Another interesting grant was the support of signage interpreting exhibits in the Dakota language. This language, also a part of South Dakota's heritage, is dying and this project is helping to preserve it, Miller commented.

In 2018 the Foundation awarded a \$15,000 grant, split over two years, to grow the zoological society's endowment fund at the Foundation. This grant helped meet the community's portion to qualify for a matching grant offered by the Andrea Waitt Carlton (AWC) Family Foundation of Nashville, Tenn. It was AWC's support that also helped LAZS establish its fund in 2001. The fund is about sustainability for years to come, said Miller. It takes \$1.1 million a year to operate the zoo, so we need to continue to grow the endowment fund to ensure we maintain our quality.

As the zoo looks forward to its summer season (starting Memorial Day), it does so with growing pride.

"We're proud of many things," Miller continued. "One of the things we're proud of is our American Zoo Association accreditation. To obtain that, we have to meet standards and operate with modern zoo practices." Foundation support has helped us do that and a variety of things. "It's not just about the projects, but about ongoing accreditation and applying for matching grants. The Foundation has been a catalyst in helping us get those matches which multiplies the impact."

Today, there's probably only a handful of the zoo's 65,000 annual visitors who can remember when Bramble Park Zoo was literally a "drive-by" zoo. Those days are long gone and 30% of the zoo's visitors travel from further than 50 miles away.

"Our mission is about coming closer to the world around us," Miller continued. "There's no doubt that the Foundation has helped us greatly in that mission."

Miller invites all ages to "come closer" and visit the zoo this summer. Hours will be 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. daily. The zoo is already boasting plenty of babies. "We have a baby bison right now and a baby spider monkey" Miller said. "We'll be getting a gaggle of goslings soon as well." Before you know it, they'll be growing by leaps and bounds!



Public Opinion photos
Bramble Park Zoo recently received a plaque to recognize its 25 straight years of accreditation from the Association of Zoo and Aquariums.



A Bramble Park zoo bear just coming out of hibernation