



2024 ANNUAL REPORT



Photo by Bianca Vilculescus



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# DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

2024 has been a year of remarkable growth and achievement for the Little Rock Zoo—arguably one of our most dynamic years yet. From expanding access to new audiences and hosting national guests, to celebrating the 100th anniversary of a beloved treasure, we've accomplished more in one year than ever before.

At the heart of this transformational year was our commitment to making the Zoo more accessible. With the launch of our **Zoo for All** initiative, guests who receive SNAP or EBT benefits can now enjoy discounted admission every day of the year. This year-round program opens our gates to more Arkansas families, reaffirming our belief that everyone deserves the chance to connect with wildlife and nature.

Under the Zoo for All umbrella and with a new partnership, we also introduced **Little Rock Community Days**, sponsored by Southern Bancorp, offering \$2 admission and \$1 parking to city of Little Rock residents once each quarter. These events have already welcomed thousands of new and returning visitors and helped deepen our connection with the community that supports our mission.

This year, we were honored to serve as a host site for the AZA Mid-Year Conference Pre-Tour, welcoming zoo professionals from across the country. Their visit coincided with the opening of our seasonal experience: **Dragon Kingdom**.

We embraced the Year of the Dragon with this wildly popular interactive exhibit featuring life-sized animatronic, mythical dragons representing cultures and perspectives from around the world. Free with Zoo admission, Dragon Kingdom captivated guests of all ages and sparked a 20% increase in attendance.

Riding that momentum, we introduced a brand-new species to the Zoo: the **Komodo dragon**. In 2024, we welcomed Iroh, a one-year-old juvenile Komodo dragon, just as construction began on his future home. Portions of our historic Reptile House are being transformed into a state-of-the-art exhibit designed specifically for adult Komodo dragons.

In April, we hosted our sold-out **Great American Eclipse** event, drawing more than 1,800 guests from across the country and around the world. The Zoo became a hub for solar science, safe viewing, and hands-on education—an unforgettable day that captured national media attention and showcased our ability to combine fun and learning on a grand scale.



On the fundraising front, **Wild Wines** shattered previous records—raising over \$100,000 to support animal care, enrichment, and conservation. With fine wines, gourmet cuisine, and entertainment, it remains one of Little Rock’s most celebrated events.

And perhaps the most heartfelt moment of the year was the **Centennial Celebration of the Over-the-Jumps Carousel**. As the only carousel of its kind still in operation, this treasured piece of history turned 100 with a celebration sponsored by Centennial Bank. The event brought together civic leaders, carousel lovers, and longtime supporters to honor its legacy and reflect on how far we’ve come—and what we’ve worked so hard to preserve.

It’s hard to overstate the impact of 2024. Every initiative launched, every event held, and every milestone reached points to a Zoo that’s growing in reach, relevance, and purpose.

We’re proud of how far we’ve come—and even more excited about where we’re headed. Thank you for being part of our journey. Together, we are inspiring people to value and conserve the natural world—one step at a time.



Susan Altrui  
**Director, Little Rock Zoo**



# NOTABLE BIRTHS

The Little Rock Zoo celebrated several significant animal births in 2024—each one a moment of joy, hope, and a powerful reminder of the role zoos play in connecting people with wildlife.

Among the most exciting arrivals was a male Bornean orangutan, born in early spring. This birth represents a meaningful contribution to the Species Survival Plan (SSP) and brings new energy and curiosity to our primate area. Guests helped us name him Kota, inspired by Kota Kinabalu in Malaysia—part of the native habitat of Bornean orangutans.

2024 also marked a landmark year for penguin births at the Little Rock Zoo. Five chicks hatched into our African penguin colony, making this our most successful penguin breeding season yet. Thanks to our dedicated animal care team and a carefully managed breeding program, the hatchlings included our first-ever artificially incubated penguin chick. To date, the Zoo has proudly hatched 16 African penguin chicks—a testament to the expertise and commitment of our staff. These chicks not only strengthen the global population under human care but also add excitement and educational value to our popular penguin exhibit.



Photo by Karen Caster



Photo by Keeper LeeAnn Goette



Photo by Karen Caster

## NOTABLE BIRTHS

In late February, our blue-eyed black lemurs, Willie and McKinnon, became first-time parents to twins—an exceptionally rare event that occurs in only about 4% of births for this critically endangered species.

Meanwhile, in a quieter corner of the Zoo, dozens of collared lizards hatched behind the scenes as part of a collaborative effort with the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission, the University of Arkansas Fayetteville, University of Central Arkansas, Arkansas Natural Heritage Commission and Arkansas Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit. These lizards—Arkansas's official state reptile—are key to native species conservation and reintroduction efforts. Through habitat restoration and breeding at the Zoo, these hatchlings will help bolster Eastern Collared Lizard populations across their natural range in the Ozark Mountains of northern Arkansas.



Photo by Keeper Juno Haley

# HONORING A GIANT: REMEMBERING SOPHIE THE ELEPHANT

In 2024, we said goodbye to one of our most beloved residents—Sophie, a 56-year-old Asian elephant whose presence touched the lives of countless guests and staff members. Sophie passed away after a long and courageous battle with pyometra, a chronic and incurable uterine infection.

Diagnosed more than seven years ago, Sophie defied the odds. Most elephants with pyometra survive less than a year, but because of the dedication and expertise of our animal care and veterinary teams, Sophie lived well beyond expectations. Her resilience is considered a remarkable achievement in veterinary medicine.

Sophie came to the Little Rock Zoo in 2013 alongside Babe, her lifelong companion, from the Niabi Zoo. They joined Zina, forming a trio of retired circus elephants who all required specialized geriatric care. At the time of her passing, Sophie had exceeded the average life expectancy for female Asian elephants in accredited zoos—47 years—by nearly a decade. Zina, now 64, and Babe, 49, continue to receive exceptional care from a team that has long been recognized for its expertise with aging elephants.

Sophie's legacy lives on, not only in the memories of those who knew and loved her, but also in our ongoing commitment to elephant welfare. In her honor, a donation was made to Asian Elephant Support, an organization dedicated to the conservation and care of elephants in their native habitats. Additionally, our horticulture team planted three native sourwood trees near the bear circle, serving as a living tribute to Sophie and her companions— who for so long were the trio of icons our guests looked forward to seeing each and every visit.

Sophie will forever remain a symbol of strength, grace, and the deep connections that can form between animals and people. She will be missed dearly by all of us at the Little Rock Zoo.



# EDUCATION HIGHLIGHTS

In 2024, the Little Rock Zoo's education efforts expanded significantly—both on Zoo grounds and out in the community—making meaningful connections with people of all ages and backgrounds. Our mission to inspire conservation through education was brought to life through the work of passionate volunteers and the launch of new outreach initiatives.

This year, our dedicated volunteers contributed 7,595.19 hours of service—equivalent to \$254,363 in organizational savings. Their efforts reflect a 12% increase in volunteer engagement compared to 2023. Volunteers enriched the Zoo experience for 79,454 guests, providing valuable insights, supporting educational programs, and fostering deeper connections between visitors and wildlife.

2024 also marked the launch of community-focused education outreach, a major step forward in making our educational programs more inclusive and accessible. We developed targeted programming designed to reach underserved audiences and meet people where they are—whether at schools, libraries, or community centers. In total, 106 offsite programs were conducted, representing an 80% increase over 2023.

These combined efforts underscore the Little Rock Zoo's commitment to education as a tool for empowerment and conservation. Whether through a hands-on animal encounter at the Zoo or a wildlife education program in the heart of the community, we're working to inspire a lifelong appreciation for the natural world and build a foundation for conservation action across Arkansas and beyond.





Photo by Karen Caster

## 2024 REVENUE

The financial health of the Little Rock Zoo remained strong in 2024, thanks to the generous support of our community, members, and partners.

Concessions \$88,600.54

Education \$18,089.63

Gift Shop \$99,151.12

Membership \$552,053.87

Misc Revenue \$17,891.00

Special Events \$87,758.15

Admissions \$1,882,165.53

Amusement Rides/Tokens \$185,312.63

Rentals \$2,298.40

**Total Revenue Earned** \$2,933,320.87

**Total Operations (Expenses)** \$7,882,366.29

**Transfer In** \$4,949,045.42

## ZOO FOUNDATION GRANTS MADE TO THE LITTLE ROCK ZOO IN 2024:

**\$106,000 New Exhibit Construction**

**\$100,000 Veterinary Equipment**

**\$95,000 Special Events & Educational Programs**

**\$55,000 Facility Upgrades**

**\$46,000 Conservation Donations**

**\$35,000 Carousel Restoration**

**\$25,000 Employee Professional Development**

**\$21,000 Zoo Signage**

**\$20,000 Summer Intern Program**

**\$20,000 Conservation Travel Program**

