

So Definitely Denver

A WILDLIFE CONNECTION TO KEEP BY MARGARET SHAKESPEARE

ROCK OUTCROPS STUD THE ROUGH, dusty landscape. So Africa. A handsome lion, enthroned atop a rosy clay mound in sparse shade, shakes his thick black mane and swats a power-packed paw at an invisible pest. So very Africa. At a safe distance from his vigilant eye, a pack of African wild dogs flops in the stern grip of midday sun. So definitely Africa. Until Chobe, one of the female wild dogs, rouses from the pack—displaying catcher's mitt ears and a scruffy coat splotched with white, brown, black, gray, and shades in between—and trots eagerly into an enclosure.

I'm at Predator Ridge in the Denver Zoo, where wild dogs, lions, and hyenas—three great African carnivores—rotate in interactive demonstrations with zookeepers. Today Chobe, on a subtle command from Heather Genter, who is standing close by but outside the enclosure, takes

center stage. Chobe stops and sits, stretches up, up, up on hind legs to expose her underside, and throws her mouth open wide, baring enamelware designed to rip and masticate flesh. As other zoo visitors and I watch, she sinks those deadly serious teeth into tidbits of ground beef, rewards for following Heather's hand and voice signals.

Heather explains, "We teach the [animals] to cooperate in their own care. When Chobe opens her mouth like this, it helps us see that she is staying healthy. The floor she is on is a scale. A wild dog should weigh between 45 and 65 pounds.

"Not many of these dogs remain in the wild, in their natural habitat. And while we can learn about them in captivity, that is no substitute for helping them survive in the wild. What are some ways for everyone to be part of that?"



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Heather looks for hands to go up. “Yes, don’t buy illegal products that reward poachers. That’s a good start. And what about recycling and not wasting natural resources such as water?”

Denver Zoo makes conservation education a major part of its mission, reaching 300,000 schoolchildren annually through on-site, in-school, and outreach programs. I nearly trip over a few of the smallest kids, rapt at the sight of a prowling snow leopard, as I thread my way past the feline building toward Tropical Discovery. Under a glass pyramid reinterpreting a Mayan temple, rain-forest critters from around the world reign, particularly howler monkeys and the semi-aquatic capybara, at 100 pounds or so, the largest known rodent. Some of the smaller exhibits—say, of a cobra—involve arrangements of leaves, branches, and ground

cover subtly lit to suggest a still life painting. Others, decked out with blossoms, gleam like jewel boxes. “We encourage our keepers, who are responsible for respective exhibits [in this collection], to be artistic,” says Ana Bowie, a zoo vice president.

But often it’s the real life stalking and spitting that draw a crowd. “Keepers do impromptu feedings with mudskippers and archer fish. They both eat crickets. Mudskippers

Two prides of African lions inhabit the Denver Zoo’s Predator Ridge exhibit (opposite). Visitors can also learn about ongoing conservation research for the endangered African wild dog (below, left). DeBrazza’s monkeys (below, right) are among the species inhabiting the zoo’s seven-acre Primate Panorama.



REACHING OUT

What to see and do

Denver Zoo
Denver's City Park
2300 Steele Street
Denver, CO 80205
303-376-4800
www.denverzoo.org

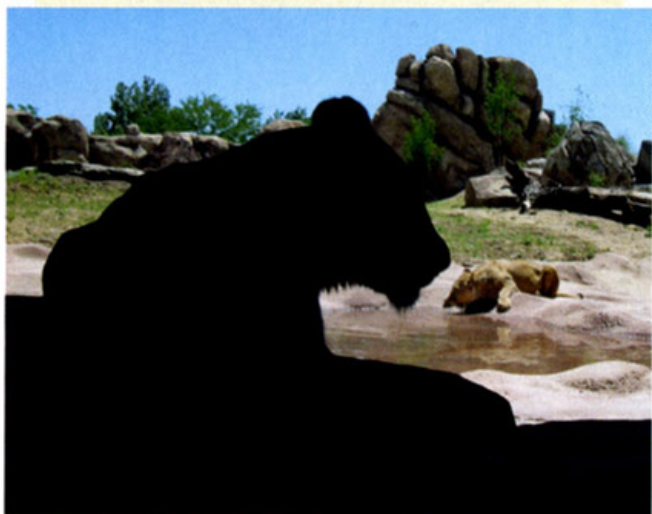
Hours: The zoo is open 10:00 A.M. to 6:00 P.M., April 1–September 30; 10:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M., October 1–March 31.

Admission: April–September: \$11, adults; \$9, seniors (ages 65+); \$7, ages 3–11. October–March: \$9, adults; \$7, seniors; \$5, ages 3–11.

Other attractions:

The Downtown Aquarium (700 Water Street, Denver, CO 80211, 303-561-4450) gives visitors the full water treatment: Walk “under” a river; get doused by a flash flood; dive with the sharks if you dare; or dine, safely and dry, tank-side in the destination restaurant. The collection emphasizes North America (river otters, rainbow and cutthroat trout) but also houses Sumatran tigers and features coral exhibits. Popular for grown-up dates, who can stay up and flirt with the fishes until 11:00 P.M. on Fridays and Saturdays.

The Butterfly and Insect Pavilion (6252 West 104th Avenue, Westminster, CO 80020, 303-469-5441; www.butterflies.org) imports 50,000 butterflies in the chrysalis stage annually from around the world. Watch the butterflies emerge and flit about in 7,000 square feet of humidity in the Wings of the Tropics greenhouse. Be brave and earn a sticker for holding Rosie, a Chilean rose-haired tarantula.



Predator Ridge (below) offers animal enrichment opportunities, including the ability to rotate hyenas, wild dogs, and lions among exhibits, where their senses of smell will be delighted by the previous inhabitants' odors.

are fish, but they walk on land to find food. And archer fish spit at their prey up to four feet away,” Bowie explains.

I turn my attention to a tank of cichlid fish from Madagascar, including the pinstripe damba cichlid, which is now extinct in the wild. “We have made six trips there in the past ten years,” Bowie says of this Indian Ocean island nation off the southern African coast. “We have commitments to several projects. One involves research on black-and-white ruffed lemurs, comparing the health of captive and wild animals.”

The zoo also has a presence in Mongolia and Southeast Asia, as well as projects that focus on Colorado habitats and species. Among the latter, the Citizens Science Wildlife Monitoring Project trains volunteers to gather information on species and their use of habitat along I-70, west of Vail Pass, over which a wildlife corridor will be constructed. Monitoring before and after bridge construction will gather baseline data on wildlife movements to determine the best location for the corridor and its long-term impact and effectiveness.

Bowie and Emily Insalaco, manager of behavioral programs, join me to see the Asiatic black bears (also called moon bears). We then visit Kootenai and Tundra, orphaned grizzlies, in their woody Northwest wilderness enclosure. Insalaco remarks, “Sometimes the animals give us projects—such as ‘Why the colobus monkey harassed the klipspringer?’ To reduce contact between the two, we elevated the colobus food, and made it more like a wild experience.”

We wind past an island exhibit, which 18 capuchin monkeys call home, and enter the lushly landscaped Primate Panorama where, once again, I feel as if I’m deep in the African continent. Drumbeats in the background, and mandrills—crests, manes, and flashy primary colors—and swamp-dwelling DeBrazza’s monkeys make it all so vivid.

“These DeBrazza’s monkeys were rescued from a bushmeat market,” Insalaco tells me, pointing out the display describing their home territory, the Congo Basin, as an African treasure. From the graphics, visitors learn that the ubiquitous cell phones connecting them to friends and family also connect directly to the Democratic Republic of Congo. Coltan, a rare mineral mined by hand in DRC, is essential in cell-phone production. Much of the mining activity takes place in mountain gorilla habitat in Kahuzi-Biega National Park, endangering both the environment and the wildlife. “We ask the [visitors] to write and post messages—on the board right here—about conserving natural resources. And we ask them to recycle old cell phones. We have quite an active program.”

That’s a connection to keep for life.

New York writer Margaret Shakespeare plans to climb one of Colorado’s fifty-four 14,000-foot peaks on her next trip to that state, to test her aptitude for altitude.