

EMPATHY MATTERS

ACE FOR WILDLIFE® NETWORK

JANUARY 2026



Season's greetings everyone, and welcome to 2026! We hope you all had time to relax and recharge over the holidays.

Starting off the year strong, we are thrilled to announce that Woodland Park Zoo has secured funds from a new private donor to support the ACE for Wildlife Network over the next two years! In the first year, these funds will enable us to hire a curriculum developer to create learning pathways and workshops on empathy content informed by existing Network resources. If you know of folks who might be interested in this opportunity, you can forward them the [link to this RFP](#). We will also now be able to offer conference scholarships to affiliates (more information to come in February). Work in the second year of the grant will likely focus on research collaborations, though we will wait to see what the strategic planning process brings to the surface before we finalize those plans. Thanks to everyone's quality work in helping us secure these additional funds.

Announcements:

2026 Virtual Empathy Summit: Our annual Summit is fast approaching – please view our [agenda here](#) and be sure to register in the events section below.

Applying for Partnership: Our applications for an organization to join as a Network Partner are closing March 31st. If your organization is interested in taking this step, please [visit this page](#) and navigate to the “Organizational Participation” tab located in the **how to join** section. The next window will be in September if your organization needs more time.

Committee Updates: See what our committees are working on in [this document](#).

Upcoming Events

To learn more and register for each event, please go to our events page [here](#).

January 13 @ 10 am - 11 am | Coffee chat: Empathy training methods for front line staff

January 21 @ 10:00 am - 11:30 am | Coffee Chat: Words that Matter Workshop

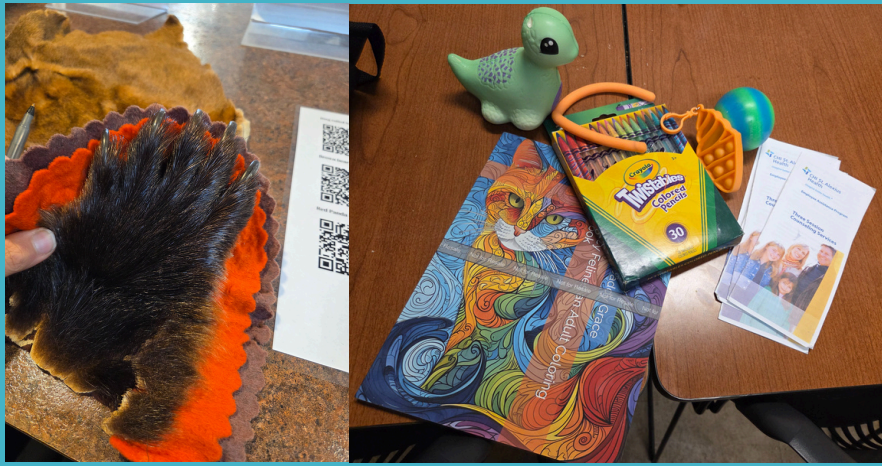
January 28 @ 11:30 am - 1:00 pm | ACE for Wildlife Network Onboarding Session: Winter Session

February 10 - 12, 2026 | Virtual Empathy Summit

Backpack, Backpack! Enhancing Inclusion and Staff Wellbeing through Backpack-Based Resources



Roosevelt Park Zoo has embraced a creative, compassion-driven approach to improving experiences for guests and staff alike—all through one simple tool: a backpack. This month, we explored two programs that use the simple tool of a backpack to improve zoo offerings: one designed to improve accessibility for zoo guests, and another focused on fostering a healthier, more supportive workplace culture.



Contents from the biofact and resilience backpacks

The **Biofacts Backpack** program began with a simple request from a teacher visiting the zoo with a visually impaired student who needed additional ways to engage with animals beyond sight. This inquiry prompted Public Programs Manager Ashley Bonen and Education Coordinator Travis Heil to consider how tactile objects and audio elements could deepen connections with animals, regardless of ability.

Their solution was a backpack filled with carefully selected biofacts that guests can

carry with them as they move through the zoo. The backpack is free to rent and available to all visitors, making it an inclusive option for school groups, families, and individuals seeking a more sensory-rich experience. Inside, guests can explore lion fur, a red panda skull replica, cast tiger paw prints, giraffe hair, and more, all offering hands-on opportunities to feel textures and forms that would otherwise be out of reach.

To further enhance engagement, the team added QR codes linking to curated animal calls. These links allow guests to hear what animals like tigers or lions sound like, even when they are quiet on habitat. While the zoo currently has just one Biofacts Backpack due to limited materials, strong community response and local media interest point toward future expansion. Staff also envision incorporating volunteers to guide guests through biofacts or creating themed routes that align with specific habitats.

Roosevelt Park Zoo continues to explore additional sensory elements, such as scent strips that represent smells cats enjoy, or objects marked with claw grooves to demonstrate animal strength. Feedback from guests has been overwhelmingly positive, with many sharing how meaningful the added accessibility has been to their visit.

Inside the staff break room, another backpack serves an entirely different purpose. Following an intentional effort to evaluate and improve staff morale, leadership introduced **“Resilience Backpacks”** which are kits filled with fidgets, therapeutic coloring books, stress balls, resource guides, and information about counseling services. These tools provide grounding and comfort during difficult days, encouraging staff to pause, decompress, and seek support when needed. Paired with open-door communication, clear expectations for healthy workplace interactions, and shared accountability between managers and staff, the Resilience Backpacks have become a well-utilized and valued resource. Their use during meetings and downtime demonstrates how small, tangible supports can make a meaningful difference in workplace wellbeing.

Together, Roosevelt Park Zoo's backpack programs highlight a powerful lesson: inclusive guest experiences and positive staff culture don't always require large budgets, just creativity, empathy, and a willingness to listen. You can learn more about this program by reaching out to the Roosevelt Park Zoo's education team [here](#).

2026 Learning Groups



Have you been working on exciting empathy-related projects that you want to share with the ACE for Wildlife Network? Now's your chance! Our 2026 Learning Group [Expression of Interest form is now live](#). We trial ran a similar system last year and had great success. This year, we've made a few changes and hope that it's even better. Before submitting an expression of interest, please review the [learning.group.planning.document.in.full](#).

What are learning groups?

Our learning groups are virtual events that provide opportunities to interrogate and share new, or build upon existing, ideas together through a series of presentations and conversation. To better meet community needs, they will look a little bit different moving forward. These events will now be 75 minutes long with presenter-prepared discussion prompts and presentation parameters clearly outlined for greater continuity.

What will they focus on?

Based on responses from our Member and Affiliate survey as well as other feedback avenues, we have identified six topics that we would love to host learning groups on. Those topics are:

- *Empathy in summer camp programming*
- *Integrating empathy into everyday projects*
- *Using effective empathy practices when talking about invasive species*
- *Identifying what critical anthropomorphism is, and is not*
- *When is empathy not the answer?*

However, we encourage anyone interested in presenting on an empathy-related project to complete the form, even if it falls outside of the parameters of pre-identified topics.

[Sign me up!](#)

The expression of interest form will be live through **February 16**. All individuals submitting a proposal through the form must be a Network Member or Affiliate. Our 2026 learning groups will be decided on and scheduled accordingly based on the submissions received.

All questions should be directed to Emily Bernhardt, Empathy Network Specialist. Thank you in advance for your contributions to advance the collective knowledge of this powerful community of practice!

THANK YOU!



Thank you to all of our dedicated committee representatives who have worked together all year to make the Network a better place for everyone. We couldn't do this work without you!

Communications Committee

Co-chair: Delanie Jellison, Santa Barbara Zoo

Co-chair: Natalie Stier, Utah's Hogle Zoo. Transferring to the Steering Committee in 2026.

Brent Weston, Dakota Zoo

Cher Vatalaro, Lehigh Valley Zoo

Leanne Schuh, Grizzly & Wolf Discovery Center

Liz Hines, Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium

Conservation Action Committee

Co-chair: Erica Carnes, Blank Park Zoo

Co-chair: Kelsey Raffel, Zoological Society of Milwaukee

Bethanie West, Idaho Falls Zoo

Brooke Tucker, ZooMontana

Toby Seegert, Zoological Society of Milwaukee

DEAI Committee

Chair: Crystal Fox, Lake Superior Zoo

Abigail Flores, Racine Zoo

Alejandra Medina, Minnesota Zoo

Julie Pickard, Zoological Society of Milwaukee

Kirinne Slaughter, Visitor Studies Association

Sharon Spencer, Jacksonville Zoo and Botanical Gardens

Membership Committee

Co-chair: Autumn Russell, Akron Zoo

Co-chair: Isabelle Bieser, Zoological Society of Milwaukee

Chris Berg, Shedd Aquarium. Term ended in December.

Heather Harelson Nutick, Conservation Society of California Oakland Zoo. Term ended in December.

Steering Committee

Interim co-chair: Aszya Summers, Lincoln Park Zoo. Rotated off in May.

Co-chair: Liz Gilles, Minnesota Zoo

Co-chair: Shana Kent, Alaska Sealife Center

Austin Reich, Zoo Boise

Courtney Cordova, Henry Vilas Zoo

Hannah Tilden, Woodland Park Zoo. Term ended in December.

Strategic Learning Committee

Chair: Jessica Schellhorn, Blank Park Zoo

Cameron Whitley, Western Washington University

Dani Ford, ZooMontana

Jennifer Gauble, Saint Louis Zoo

Monica Digre, Como Park Zoo & Conservatory. Rotated off in August.

EMPATHY MATTERS

ACE FOR WILDLIFE® NETWORK

FEBRUARY 2026



Hello everyone! Wishing you a happy February, and a shadow-less ground hog! We can't wait to see many of you soon for our Empathy Summit in less than two weeks.

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

2026 Conference Scholarships: Do you have an empathy-related project that you want to share at an upcoming conference? We are currently accepting applications for scholarships for Members and Affiliates to present on an empathy-related project at AZA or other conferences. [Please review this discussion post for details and further information.](#)

Photo Competition – Help Select our Winners: Our photo contest committee has made the difficult decision to determine the top finalists from our incredible submissions. Please help us choose our winners [here](#).

Have you been working on exciting empathy-related projects that you want to share with the ACE for Wildlife Network? Our 2026 Learning Group [Expression of Interest form is now live](#) until February 19th. Before submitting an expression of interest, please review the [learning group planning document in full](#).

Help Assess Our Network's EcoCulture: [This assessment](#) from our Canopy Strategic Partners will help us assess how energy, collaboration, leadership, and trust exist in the Network, and what conditions will help us thrive in the future. Your responses will add to the data's biodiversity, and we hope that this feedback can help us create a healthier and more resilient Network. **The survey takes about 15 minutes to complete and will remain open through March 2, 2026.*

Resource Feature: [The Interconnections of DEAI Initiatives and Effective Empathy Practices:](#) This resource, created by the DEAI committee, highlights the relationship between effective empathy practices and DEAI initiatives by showcasing different projects from across the Network.

Upcoming Events

To learn more and register for each event, please go to our events page [here](#).

February 10 - 12, 2026 | Virtual Empathy Summit

February 26 9:30 am - 11 am | Learning Group: Using empathy to tell better conservation focused stories (Part II)

Putting the Community in Community Science - ZooMontana's Bumble Bee Surveys



We are deep into winter, but as many of you know, Spring planning comes quickly in the education and conservation world. This season, we're highlighting a warm-weather project from ZooMontana that not only contributed meaningful data to conservation science, but also brought staff together through a shared, hands-on experience. To learn more, we spoke with Abbi Robson, ZooMontana's Conservation Engagement Manager—a role that is brand new to the organization and dedicated solely to conservation.

ZooMontana has prioritized conservation since opening in 1995, but as a smaller AZA-accredited Zoo, limited staff capacity has often made it challenging to fully develop and sustain conservation initiatives. With support from the Advancing Empathy grant program, ZooMontana was able to create this new position, allowing Abbi to focus on engaging staff and the community in conservation efforts while evaluating how empathy-infused messaging shows up in existing programs.

Since starting in June 2025, Abbi has centered much of her work around community science projects, with bumble bee surveys emerging as a standout success. Conducted through Bumble Bee Watch—a continent-wide community science program run by the Xerces Society—the surveys invited ZooMontana staff to step into the role of field researchers. Armed with butterfly nets, coolers (for safely encouraging the bees to fall asleep), and timers, small teams surveyed designated garden areas on Zoo grounds, gently collecting, photographing, and releasing bumble bees while recording detailed data on plant associations, species, and sex.

Luckily, ZooMontana is home to numerous pollinator gardens which proved to be ideal survey locations. Over the course of the summer, staff conducted weekly surveys contributing verified data to a larger effort to better understand bumble bee distributions across North America. One particularly exciting outcome was the confirmation of two-spotted bumble bees near the western edge of their known range, helping fill an important data gap in a region where insect research is often limited.

Beyond the scientific impact, there was also a clear empathy component. As Abbi shared, once someone participates in even a single survey, it's hard not to fall in love with the species they are studying. Close-up photos revealed individual quirks: pollen-dusted legs, worn wings, even tiny tongues peeking out of the bumble bees they surveyed. Staff worked together in an informal "assembly line," carefully caring for bees fostering both connection and pride.

Looking ahead, ZooMontana hopes to expand these efforts through staff training, volunteer involvement, and community workshops that empower people to conduct surveys in their own gardens and neighborhoods. By starting small, embracing trial and error, and centering empathy alongside data collection, ZooMontana is demonstrating how community science can be both impactful and personal! If you are curious to learn more about how ZooMontana collaborated with the Xerces society to launch this program, you can reach out to Abbi [here](#).



ZooMontana community science in action!



ZooMontana staff analyzing data from their bumble bee surveys.



Up-close bumble bee photo from survey.

Awareness to Action: Using the Transtheoretical Model to Support Empathy Adoption



Empathy for wildlife can mean very different things to the organizations across our Network. Some are fully embracing empathy-centered practices, while others are still unsure how this approach fits into their mission. This month, we're sharing a powerful framework from Jen Rudolph, Manager of Ambassador Animal Programs at Roger Williams Park Zoo, that was adapted to fit a process for adopting empathy into our organizations.

This original model is named the **Transtheoretical Model (TTM)** and was originally developed by Prochaska and DiClemente (1983), to demonstrate that behavior change happens in stages. Rather than jumping directly from "not doing something" to "fully integrated," individuals and organizations move through predictable phases of readiness as described by the TTM. Jen's work with TTM grew out of a research fellowship with Antioch University New England, where she explored how the model could be applied to sustainability efforts in zoos along with colleagues Dr. Nichole Nageotte, Dr. Joe Heimlich, and Victoria Threadgill. What emerged was a framework simple enough to use in real-world settings, yet powerful enough to guide complex cultural change like adopting empathy as a shared practice.

Before diving into these stages, Jen emphasizes that progress begins with a collective definition. Organizations must first come to a shared understanding of what "empathy" actually means in their specific context to ensure everyone is working toward the same goal. Once that foundation is set, empathy adoption can move from an abstract concept into clear, actionable practices, such as:

- Visitor and community engagement that starts with "What matters to you?" rather than telling people what they should care about.
- Animal care approaches that recognize individual preferences and emotional states alongside established protocols.
- Internal culture where staff feel safe expressing challenges and leaders ask, "What are you experiencing?"
- Conservation messaging that acknowledges competing values and real constraints, rather than pushing harder against resistance.

Importantly, she stresses that empathy adoption does not mean abandoning science, professionalism, or objectivity. Instead, it strengthens decision-making by deepening understanding of perspectives and strengthening relationships between staff, visitors, community and animals.

Once a groundwork is laid, the model encourages users to explore the **five stages of adoption**—in this case, empathy adoption.

The five stages of change are **Precontemplation, Contemplation, Preparation, Action, and Maintenance.**



In **Precontemplation**, empathy is simply not on the radar. Organizations in this stage may view empathy as outside their mission, unnecessary, or even at odds with science-based work. Common responses include, “We’re about data, not feelings,” or “Our current approach works fine.” At this stage, progress doesn’t come from mandates or training. Instead, gentle awareness-building such as sharing peer success stories or research connecting empathy to conservation outcomes.

In **Contemplation**, empathy is being considered, but ambivalence remains. Leaders and staff may see potential value while also worrying about time, resources, staff buy-in, or professional credibility. What helps here is honest dialogue: acknowledging concerns, exploring both benefits and tradeoffs, and offering low-risk pilot opportunities that allow organizations to test ideas.

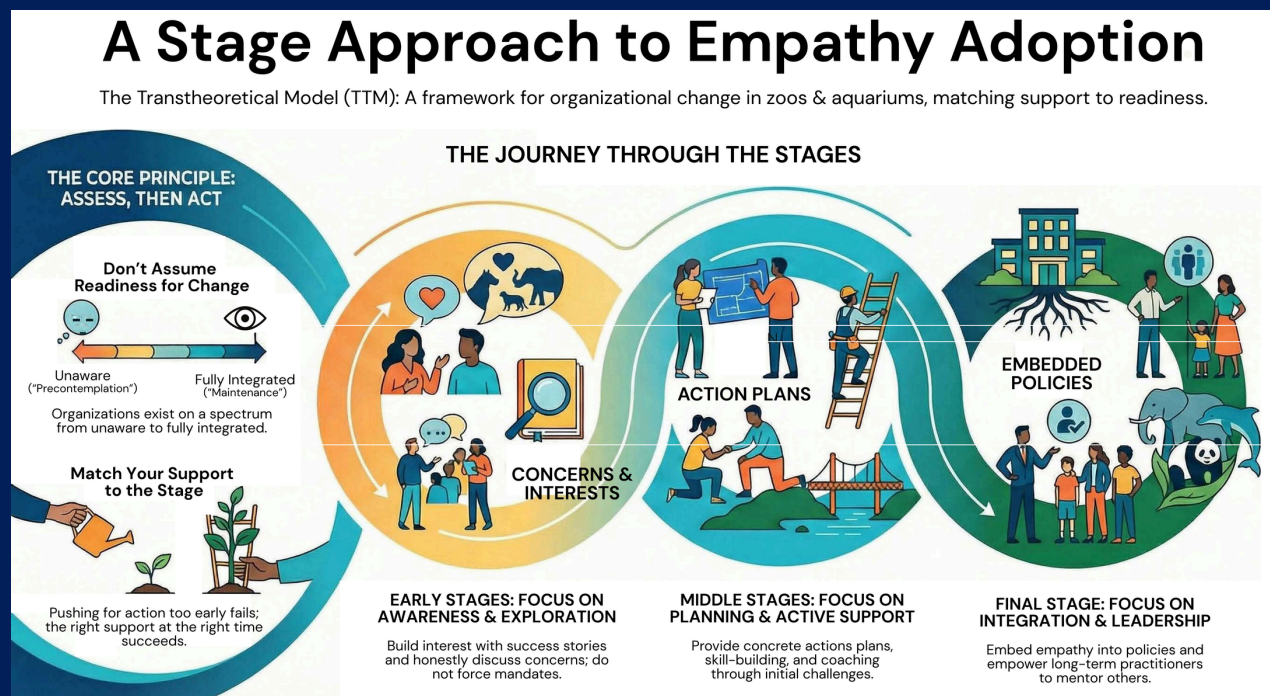
Preparation is the stage where intention becomes tangible. Organizations are actively planning to integrate empathy into their work and asking practical questions: Where do we start? Who should be involved? What does success look like?

In the **Action** stage, empathy practices are actively being implemented. This is often the most effort-intensive phase, requiring learning, adjustment, and patience. Early wins may appear alongside real challenges, including uneven staff participation or uncertainty about how to respond in difficult moments. Ongoing coaching, peer support, and celebrating progress are critical for sustaining momentum.

Finally, **Maintenance** is reached when empathy is no longer a special initiative, but an integrated part of how the organization operates. Empathy is embedded in policies, onboarding, evaluation, and leadership practices. While effort is still required, it becomes more intuitive and self-reinforcing.

This adaptation of the TTM shows that empathy adoption prioritizes relationship-building over checking boxes. It reframes empathy not as a mandate, but as a practice that grows over time. For those interested in exploring this framework more deeply, [this linked document](#) expands on each stage of empathy adoption, offers reflection prompts for self-assessment, and outlines stage-appropriate strategies for moving forward. Jen also welcomes those who are interested in this model to reach out with any questions via email: jenrudolph401@gmail.com, or feel free to connect with [Jen on LinkedIn](#).

Jen's approach builds on emerging research applying the TTM to conservation behaviors, including prior zoo studies by Dierking et al. (2004) and Nageotte (2019), and a comprehensive review published in Zoo Biology (Abrash Walton et al., 2022) examining the TTM as a tool for conservation practitioners."



EMPATHY MATTERS

ACE FOR WILDLIFE® NETWORK

MARCH 2026



Hello everyone,

And just like that, we have another Empathy Summit in the books! As always, it was great to see so many faces from the Network, and we are feeling energized from all the meaningful and thoughtful collaboration. We have so much to look forward to in 2026 and beyond.

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

Partner Application Deadline Approaching

The deadline for the spring round of Partner applications is March 31st! This round is the last one before the 2027 Empathy Summit where new Partner Organizations would receive travel benefits to facilitate staff attendance at the in-person event. Prospective applicants should review our [Network bylaws](#) and [expansion plan](#) before applying and can learn more about Partner Organization requirements [here](#). The Membership Committee will be hosting office hours mid-month for those filling out the application. Event details will be shared on the discussion board.

Empathy Summit Session Recordings [can be found here](#) if you missed the event. There were many great sessions, so do check them out.

Want to be Featured in our Newsletter? If you're working on an empathy related project – the ACE for Wildlife Network community wants to hear about it! You can learn more and submit a feature for a future edition of Empathy Matters through our new [newsletter submission platform](#).

2026 Conference Scholarships: Do you have an empathy-related project that you want to share at an upcoming conference? We are currently accepting applications for scholarships for Members and Affiliates to present on an empathy-related project at AZA or other conferences. [Please review this discussion post for details and further information.](#)

Photo Competition: Congratulations to our 2026 Empathy Photo Contest Winners! You can [see all our beautiful submissions here](#).

Upcoming Events

To learn more and register for each event, please go to our events page [here](#).

March 11 11:00 am - 12:00 pm PST | Coffee chat: Empathy Test Kitchen

Bright Spots of Empathy in the Bronx Zoo's *World of Darkness*



When I think back to my first visits to the zoo, I fondly recall trips to nocturnal houses and the awe I felt as I was transported to a hidden world of animal activity. When the Bronx Zoo's *World of Darkness* reopened in summer 2025 after a 16-year closure, it wasn't just the return of a beloved exhibit; it was also an opportunity to reimagine how people connect with species that are often misunderstood, overlooked, unfamiliar, or even feared.

When it originally opened in 1969, *World of Darkness* was one of the first zoo exhibits to showcase nocturnal animals on a reverse light cycle, allowing visitors to observe night-dwelling creatures at their most active. While fostering empathy was not explicitly defined as a goal of the new exhibit, the objectives of inspiring awe and appreciation for animals were woven throughout the design. Guided by the core idea that all nocturnal animals have fascinating adaptations that help them survive in the dark, the exhibit invites visitors to discover the amazing behaviors, body features, and senses that make each species unique.

Interactive consoles placed directly in front of habitats encourage guests to engage their senses in playful, intuitive ways. Visitors can imagine having long, spindly fingers like an aye-aye by tapping an illustrated log to reveal hidden grubs, simulating how the animal searches for food. Elsewhere, guests learn about vampire bat behavior by pressing a button to reveal how these bats detect blood vessels beneath a cow's skin using heat-sensitive receptors in their noses.

These moments of perspective-taking are paired with thoughtfully crafted animal ID labels that go beyond basic facts. For vampire bats, the team intentionally highlighted their social bonds, specifically how individuals will regurgitate blood to feed colony members who haven't eaten. Rather than softening the reality of how vampire bats survive by drinking blood, this approach offers an opportunity for connection through empathy framing—interpreting these animals as individuals who care for each other. This subtle reframing of science-based content has the power to reduce potential feelings of fear or disgust and spark empathy, even for animals with challenging reputations.

The *World of Darkness* exhibit also takes an empathetic approach to managing guest behavior. In addition to directive rules such as "Camera flash must be off. For the best photos, use the long exposure setting," some rules are communicated from the animals' perspective. One entry sign that features an illustration of a douroucoulis (also known as a night monkey) at children's height reminds visitors, "Bright light can hurt our eyes! Please don't use your phone flashlight or camera flash." By grounding these messages in both care for animals and a good visitor experience, the exhibit encourages compliance through understanding and compassion rather than enforcement.

Early evaluation results suggest this approach is resonating. Visitors report high satisfaction, strong engagement with interactive elements, and increased learning about adaptations, conservation efforts, and the adverse effects of lights on nocturnal animals. Perhaps most telling: bats emerged as a fan favorite, outshining even traditionally "cute" species. In the dark, curiosity grows, and empathy follows!



A “Closer Look” at Creating Empathy Through Observation



Sometimes, sparking empathy starts with something as simple as asking, “*Do you want a closer look?*” At the Saint Louis Zoo, a simple yet powerful docent-led bird engagement project is proving that a single pair of binoculars can transform not only how guests see birds, but how they feel about them.

The project was initiated by volunteer docent Joanne Vogelpohl, who regularly interprets at the Zoo’s historic Bird House. This habitat showcases a diverse collection of species from rhinoceros hornbills and Victorian pigeons to bleeding-heart doves. Like many of us who have a soft spot for certain animals, Joanne noticed that some of these birds weren’t receiving the curiosity or enthusiasm they deserved. Her solution was refreshingly simple: Invite guests to slow down and observe more closely by offering them a pair of binoculars.

By placing binoculars directly into guests’ hands, docents create an immediate point of connection. What might otherwise feel like a quiet walkthrough becomes an interactive experience rooted in curiosity, play, and shared discovery. Asking someone if they want to use a pair of binoculars also serves as an easy, non-invasive way to break the ice and begin talking about animals.



Guest uses binoculars to get a closer look at Saint Louis Zoo’s beautiful birds!

As guests search for various birds, docents guide them using open-ended questions and gentle prompts: *What do you notice? Where do you think this bird lives? How might you get there?* [Conservation conversation guides](#) further support these interactions by equipping docents with key biological details and conservation messages to deepen the experience.

The use of this interpretive tool’s impact is amplified through its family-centered approach. Parents often step in to help children adjust the binoculars, turning observation into a collaborative experience. In these moments, empathy spreads outward from animal to child and from child to caregiver. Zoo guests also are reminded that birding doesn’t require expensive gear or expert knowledge; it can begin right where they are. Many are pleasantly surprised to learn that binoculars can even be borrowed from local libraries.

Beyond the Bird House, this interpretive tool is used in the historic [1904 World’s Fair Flight Cage](#) and Cypress Swamp area of the Zoo, where binoculars could help guests locate animals within a larger, more immersive environment. Wherever it appears, the goal remains the same: to help guests slow down, look closer, and recognize animals not as background scenery, but as living beings worthy of care. You can [connect with Joanne here](#) if you want to learn more about this project.

EMPATHY MATTERS

ACE FOR WILDLIFE® NETWORK

APRIL 2026



Hi everyone,

We are happy to celebrate the start of Spring with you all. It's a time of growth, renewal, and often, new animal arrivals. At Woodland Park Zoo, we're marking the moment with the arrival of two lion cubs, featured in our headline photo!

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

ACE for Wildlife Network Fall Meeting: Save the date for our annual fall Network meeting! The fall meeting will be taking place on October 22nd from 10:30 am - 12:30 pm PST. We hope to see you there!

Want to be Featured in our Newsletter? If you're working on an empathy related project – the ACE for Wildlife Network community wants to hear about it! You can learn more and submit a feature for a future edition of Empathy Matters through our new [newsletter submission platform](#).

2026 Conference Scholarships: Do you have an empathy-related project that you want to share at an upcoming conference? We are currently accepting applications for scholarships for Members and Affiliates to present on an empathy-related project at AZA or other conferences. [Please review this discussion post for details and further information.](#)

Q1 Committee Updates can be viewed [here](#).

Resource Feature: Our [empathy primer](#) tells you all you need to know about the ACE for Wildlife Network, the case for empathy, tools you can use to effectively infuse this work into your organization and examples of projects done by Partners. We've had some exciting updates since we created this resource, so we encourage you to check it out and share it with your colleagues.

Upcoming Events

To learn more and register for each event, please go to our events page [here](#).

April 14 @ 10 am - 11:15 am PST | Learning Group: Infusing Empathy in Zoo Summer Camps

April 23 @ 10 am - 11:30 am PST | ACE for Wildlife Network Spring Welcome Session

A Creative Way to Share the Love for Overlooked Animals



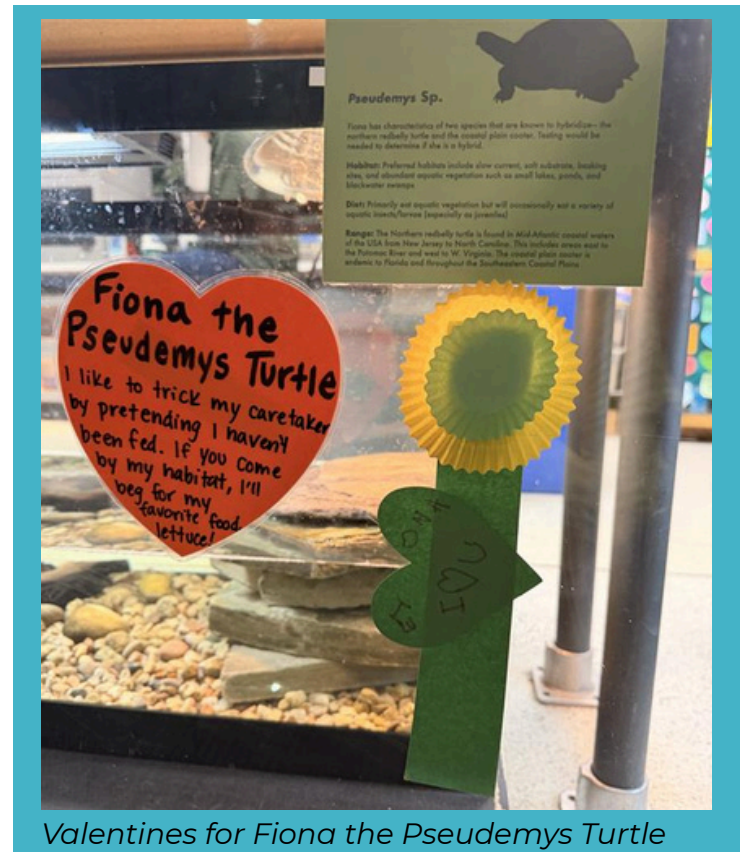
In our Network, we are no stranger to the narrative that mammals sometimes take center stage as guests' favorite animals. But at the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum of the Chicago Academy of Sciences, the stars of the show look a little different. The museum's living collections feature exclusively non mammal creatures, offering a twist on what we often see in zoos and aquariums.

Recently at our virtual Empathy Summit, Jennifer Olson, Director of Guest and Community Engagement, and Elena Webster, Community Programs Specialist, shared how their museum invites visitors to see these animals in a new light by writing them Valentine's Day cards. This activity uses framing to highlight animals as individuals with their own behaviors and life experiences. While Valentine's Day is an ideal time to implement this project, people do not have to wait for a holiday to try something similar, especially considering the appreciation we have for animals every day.

To prepare for the program, the education team worked closely with the museum's biology department to create short "empathy hooks" for each animal in the Mysteries of the Marsh exhibit, ensuring that everything was both engaging and scientifically accurate. Behind the scenes, the team created a shared spreadsheet listing every animal in the exhibit. For each one, they wrote a short empathy hook that highlighted a behavior, personality trait, or life story. These messages were then displayed in the exhibit as heart shaped signs.

Some of these signs shared the stories of animals who now call the museum home, such as Gumbo the Mississippi mud turtle. Gumbo was discovered in a bag of crayfish shipped to a Chicago restaurant. Gumbo was rescued and given a new home at the museum.

Nearby, Gertie the Chicago garter snake's sign shared another story. Because of an injury, she couldn't survive in the wild, but she now lives safely at the museum where she helps visitors learn about a subspecies unique to the Chicago region.



Valentines for Fiona the Pseudemys Turtle

After exploring the exhibit and reading the hearts, visitors were invited to create a Valentine for the animal they felt most connected to. At a craft table outside the exhibit, guests made flower shaped cards from cupcake liners and construction paper, wrote a message, and taped their Valentine near the habitat. The messages are often heartfelt, funny, or wonderfully simple. This year, one child wrote to Gertie, "You are my favorite because you are long."

Over the course of the weekend, the exhibit fills with colorful cards during this program. Children sometimes search for animals that have not yet received a Valentine so that no one is left out, even writing messages for feeder fish, insect residents, or biofacts.

While the activity is themed around Valentine's Day, the idea behind it can extend far beyond a single holiday. By highlighting animals as individuals and inviting visitors to express appreciation, simple moments of creativity can open the door to empathy for species that might otherwise go unnoticed.

To learn more about this project, [you can watch the project shareout](#) or reach out to Jennifer and Elena at programs@naturemuseum.org for additional information.

Empathy in Action at the Natural History Museums



As the Advancing Conservation through Empathy for Wildlife Network continues to grow beyond zoos and aquariums, we are always excited to see how other institutions are weaving empathy into their programs and experiences. This month we spoke with Anya Hunter, Senior Manager of Interpretation Education, and Becca Prater, Museum Educator at the Natural History Museums of Los Angeles County, about two creative initiatives that help visitors connect more deeply with the natural world.

Through their participation in the [LEGO Playful Learning Museum Network](#), the museum incorporates learning-through-play experiences into festivals and events such as their [dinosaur festival and upcoming pollinator celebration](#).

At these events, children are introduced to a conservation challenge and invited to build imaginative solutions using LEGOs. During the recent Dino Fest, the focus was on empowering people to create solutions to help modern dinosaurs [aka birds] avoid extinction. Urban birds face specific challenges in city environments, including excess artificial light that can disrupt their sleep. Museum Educators first built knowledge and value around the topic using empathy best practices, and invited perspective-taking by asking children to consider what birds experience while living in cities. They drew connections between dinosaurs and modern birds, reminding participants that while dinosaurs disappeared after an asteroid impact, we have the opportunity to protect their living relatives.



Young learners building environmental solutions using legos

From there, guests designed their own creative conservation solutions. One young participant even imagined a robot that could absorb excess city light to help birds rest at night. As Becca shared, the “innocent imagination” of children often leads to surprisingly thoughtful ideas! The activity concluded with a pledge station, where individuals commit to small conservation actions like turning off lights at night.

Another program, [Collections Revealed](#), invites guests to meet a researcher and view a typically unseen portion of the museum’s collections. In this moderated program, curators and researchers introduce a specimen or animal, explain how it is cared for, and

discuss how it helps scientists understand change and care over time.

In one recent session featuring a live banana slug, Becca began by asking children how they felt about the animal. Some reacted with exaggerated “gross” expressions while others showed excitement.

As the slug’s eye stalks slowly emerged on camera under a scope, the audience naturally quieted down, recognizing that the animal needed a calm environment to feel safe. A beautiful learning moment progressed as observers slowed down, paid closer attention, and began to connect with the slug, with many transforming into slug superfans by the end of the session. Moments like this create opportunities for visitors to practice empathy through observation and perspective-taking.

For the museum educator team, a key lesson is simple: sometimes the most important step is just to try. Sometimes just giving a new idea a chance can be the starting point for incredible programming. If you want to learn more about either of these projects, you can reach out to Anya Hunter at ahunter@nhm.org or 213-763-3213.



Hello everyone,

Wishing you a happy May – we are looking forward to diving into announcements and updates with you all this month

Curriculum Development Initiative

We are excited to announce that we have selected Mandy Kirchgessner, Ed.D, Executive Director of Nonprofit GrowthGen (NPGG), and Kyrie Kellett, Founding Principal of Mason Bee Interpretive Planning, to partner with on the curriculum development project we have underway.

Mandy began her career at the Phoenix Zoo and went on to lead public and youth programs for major museums and aquariums, while also earning a master's and doctorate in educational design focused on conservation education. As a military spouse, she has global experience in curriculum development, evaluation, and capacity-building across institutions such as Shedd Aquarium and Bishop Museum. Since founding NPGG, LLC in 2022, she has supported museums and nonprofits nationwide, guided by a passion for making learning engaging, inclusive, and learner-centered.

Kyrie Kellett will partner with NPGG as a thought partner and support product refinement, bringing deep experience across museums, science centers, arboreta, and parks. Her career includes leading large federally funded, cross-functional projects at the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry (OMSI) and founding Mason Bee Interpretive Planning, where she develops research-grounded visitor experience plans, programs, and grants. She also serves as Lead Trainer for the NAI Interpretive Planning course and recently completed a full curriculum redesign of the course.

As part of this initiative, we would like to create a Curriculum Development Working Group with 4-5 Members and Affiliates. **For more information about getting involved, visit our website.** **Applications will be due May 8th.** We will share more about what this project will entail in coming weeks. Stay tuned for more details!

ANNOUNCEMENTS:



The Communications Committee invites you to share your voice in the ACE for Wildlife Network Newsletter! [Learn more about this opportunity here.](#)

Empathy Photo Contest: Are you passionate about photography as an art form? Come be a part of our Empathy Photo Contest Working Group! This group will shape the 2026 Network photography contest, review submissions, and help to disseminate contest information. Our first meeting will be in early June, followed by a few meetings from June to October. This working group will dissolve after the contest concludes and requires a minimal time commitment outside of scheduled meetings. Email empathy@zoo.org before May 20th if you are interested in joining this group.

Resource Feature: [From information-sharing to collaboration: how structured networks support professional practice in zoos and aquariums.](#) This study examined how our Network's structured design and facilitation supported information-sharing and collaboration among participating zoos and aquariums. The results demonstrate that information-sharing served as a critical foundation for collaboration, with participants forming new partnerships and leveraging shared resources.

Committee Retreat Update

There's a lot happening across the ACE for Wildlife Network, and we're excited to share a snapshot of our ongoing Strategic Planning Process along with a highlight from our recent time together in Minnesota.

Last month, the Steering Committee and committee chairs gathered in person to dive into the Discovery Phase of our strategic planning work. Hosted by Como Park Zoo & Conservatory, the April retreat brought together 20 Network participants for a day of thoughtful discussion, reflection, and collaboration.

This process is being guided by Canopy Strategic Partners, who are helping us build a data-driven roadmap for the Network's future. Since December, their team has conducted interviews, listening sessions and surveys with Network participants to better understand our current landscape and where members hope to see the Network grow. During the retreat, we reviewed early findings and began working through key areas of tension and opportunity.

Two themes rose to the surface. The first: balancing depth of impact with scale of influence. As we seek ways to grow sustainably and strategically, how do we expand our reach while maintaining the meaningful, relationship-driven work that defines the Network? The second: designing a leadership structure that supports growth while preserving the culture that makes this network feel inclusive, collaborative, and grounded.



Group Photo from the 2026 Committee Retreat



Committee members explored these questions together, identifying potential pathways forward that will help ensure the Network evolves alongside our community's needs. In the coming weeks, Canopy Strategic Partners will compile a full report to guide next steps. We've already made meaningful progress, and we're looking forward to sharing more soon.

While at Como, we couldn't pass up the opportunity to connect with staff and learn about new empathy-centered initiatives. Please enjoy this excerpt from a standout project that came from Leah Peterson Sisler and the Como CARES Team:

"Did you know that Gentoo penguins "gift" their partners with the perfect pebble? While this behavior is not observed in African penguins, the Como CARES (Connection, Access, Reach, Engagement, and Storytelling) Team loved the idea of exchanging beautiful rocks to communicate kindness, empathy, and wildlife conservation.

Como Park Zoo & Conservatory partnered with MN Kindness Alliance and the Anoka Kindness Rock Garden for a rock painting activity during its "Waddle into Action" AZA SAFE Conservation Weekend for African penguins, powered by Xcel Energy. Participants were invited to paint their own rock—or three—with images to inspire conservation, kindness, community, connection, and empathy for wildlife.

Each rock was affixed with a QR code leading to deeper engagement with African penguin conservation through Como's global partner, SANCCOB. Participants were encouraged to leave their perfect Penguin Pebbles around the community for others to discover, enjoy, and learn more about African penguin conservation.

Como's penguin rocks have been scanned 180 times in the weeks following "Waddle into Action," according to webpage analytics.



Rock Painting from the "Waddle into Action" Project

Como Friends Conservation Sponsorship: For every Penguin Pebble painted, Como Friends donated \$1.25 to our global conservation partners at the South African Foundation for the Conservation of Coastal Birds (SANCCOB), a non-profit organization dedicated to rescuing, rehabilitating, and conserving seabirds—especially endangered species like the African penguin.

Fueled by public participation (800 rocks painted = \$1,000 USD / 16 850,00 ZAR donated), Como Friends sponsored all 19 African penguins currently receiving medical care through SANCCOB for rehabilitation and wild release, along with 20 African penguin eggs to be hatched, hand-reared, and released."

Upcoming Events

To learn more and register for each event, please go to our events page [here](#).

EMPATHY MATTERS

ACE FOR WILDLIFE® NETWORK

JUNE 2026



Hello everyone,

Happy (almost) summer! We're starting off the sunny season strong with the announcement of our sixth and seventh round of Advancing Empathy Grants! With these latest rounds, we are up to 90 funded projects totaling almost \$9 million.

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

Calling all Network enthusiasts! [Apply to be in our second cohort of Empathy Champions!](#) Cohort members design and lead outreach projects that engage new partners and audiences in empathy for wildlife. We are looking for 10 active Network participants to join this professional development opportunity which you can [learn more about here](#).

2027 Empathy Summit: We have officially announced early details regarding our 2027 Empathy Summit coming up next February and are seeking around 10 individuals to review and select presentation proposals for the Empathy Summit. These representatives' registration fees for the Empathy Summit will be waived. Our call for proposals is also open! Visit our [Summit information page](#) for more details.

Resource Feature: Thank you to everyone in the Network that helped shape the first version of our ACE for Wildlife Network Words that Matter document which [you can check out here](#).

EMZAAP Update: This summer, the Empathy Measurement in Zoo and Aquarium Audiences Project (EMZAAP) is progressing towards its goal of creating a validated survey to measure empathy stimulated by zoo and aquarium experiences with data collection on a draft survey instrument underway at Alaska SeaLife Center, Henry Vilas Zoo, Saint Louis Zoo, Seattle Aquarium, Woodland Park Zoo, and Zoological Society of Milwaukee. Staff at these organizations have been working together since January 2025 to identify and define relevant constructs associated with empathy for animals and develop a set of questions designed to accurately and reliably measure each of them. In summer 2025, Woodland Park Zoo and Seattle Aquarium successfully conducted an initial round of pilot data collection, yielding promising results that allowed the team to significantly refine the initial set of questions. This summer, each collaborator will test the draft survey at a unique program or exhibit, each focusing on a different species to help ensure the final survey tool is suitable for use at zoo and aquarium experiences featuring any type of animal. At the end of this summer of data collection, the EMZAAP team will further refine the survey instrument and begin preparing for publication in an academic journal.

In addition to the survey instrument, EMZAAP is developing two evaluation tools for use with early childhood audiences. In collaboration with Woodland Park Zoo summer camps, the team has created two tools: a token drop activity for assessing children's feelings before and after seeing an animal in a program or exhibit and an observation tool for use during activities where

children practice providing medical care for stuffed animals. The EMZAAP team would greatly appreciate feedback from anyone interested in testing them with their early childhood audiences. You can find these drafts on the Discussion Board [here](#). Both the early childhood instruments and the survey instrument will be further refined after testing this summer and will be released to the Network next year.



International Crane Foundation

Hopefully you've gotten your fill of Girl Scouts of the USA cookies this year, but if you're still craving that Girl Scout spirit, a creative collaboration with the International Crane Foundation (ICF) offers a fresh way to connect with nature and conservation.

Since launching in May 2024, ICF's Wetland Protector program has invited Girl Scout troops from kindergarten through 12th grade to engage in an immersive, hands-on experience centered on crane conservation. The program grew organically after scout leaders expressed interest in expanding traditional tours into something more interactive and badge-oriented. With guidance from a volunteer who previously served as a troop leader, ICF developed a program that aligns with Girl Scout badge requirements while remaining engaging and accessible for participants.

While the Wetland Protector badge itself is not an official Girl Scout badge, it is created and provided by ICF and can complement badge work, particularly within the Eco Series or, for some groups, the Animal Habitats badge. In most cases, scouts complete their badge requirements during their visit, though some activities such as creating a poster or digital project may be finished afterward.

Programs typically run three to three-and-a-half hours and offer a rich variety of experiences. At ICF, scouts can observe all 15 species of cranes, which is the only place in the world where this is possible, while learning what makes each species unique, including their cultural significance. Participants also explore restored ecosystems, from tallgrass prairie to wetlands and oak savanna, gaining a deeper understanding of the habitats cranes rely on.

Scouts might also participate in activities like planting native species, observing wildlife, or even conducting a trash cleanup to center conservation action. In tandem, ICF educators also highlight the global conservation efforts that support crane populations, underscoring the importance of community partnerships in protecting endangered species.

Though still relatively new, the program is growing quickly. In its first two years, ICF hosted around five troops per season (about 120 scouts total) but interest is already increasing, with 2026 reservations surpassing those early numbers. Feedback from troop leaders has been overwhelmingly positive, noting both the educational value and the fun, memorable experiences for scouts.

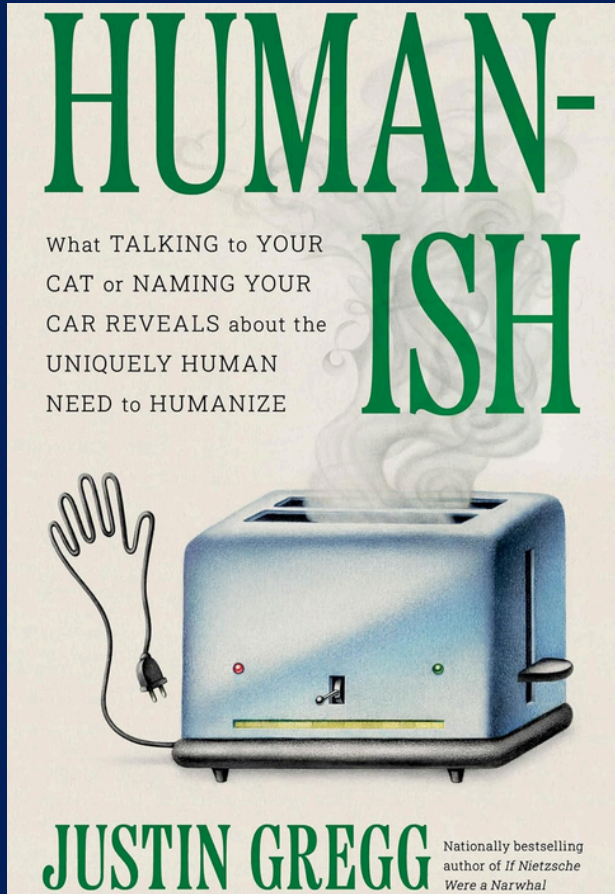
Currently marketed primarily to local Girl Scout troops, the program is open to other groups as well and ICF encourages anyone interested to reach out with questions or to learn more. For more information, you can contact Jennifer Drayna at jdrayna@savingcranes.org.



Girl Scouts Badge Program at International Crane Foundation



Empathy in literature: A book review of *Humanish: What Talking to Your Cat or Naming Your Car Reveals About the Uniquely Human Need to Humanize*, by Justin Gregg



I'm often asked, "how can we foster empathy for wildlife without anthropomorphizing?" I cannot help but read this question and sense an underlying implicit assumption that the act of anthropomorphizing is inherently bad. As someone who consciously anthropomorphizes quite often (my cars have had names and unique personalities, I give distinct voices to the pets I've cared for, my plants have names...you get the picture), it's difficult to not give a biased answer to that question. My anthropomorphic tendencies certainly influence how I perceive the world – but are they a flaw?

If there is one takeaway from this approachable pop-science book, it's that anthropomorphism is the most human trait there is. Gregg argues it, in fact, might be one of our species' greatest strengths. While occasionally repetitive, this book illustrates how embedded anthropomorphism is in global culture – influencing everything from how we perceive the danger of natural disasters, treat our pets, pick our favorite animals, make purchasing decisions, to how we can better understand our own biases toward anthropomorphism.

An unexpected twist came on page 216. Right in front of me was text describing **Racine Zoo's virtual Empathy Explorer's program** that utilized effective empathy practices and shifted children's attitudes towards Madagascar hissing cockroaches! Racine Zoo has been a Partner in the ACE for Wildlife Network since the very beginning, and it was fantastic to see them receive their flowers in this way. While it may not always feel obvious, our work is contributing to larger conversations about how people interact with the world, and in our case, act pro-environmentally. Our work demonstrates that when approached thoughtfully and exercised critically, anthropomorphism can be a tool that enriches our relationship with the natural world – not compromises it.

If you are looking for an easy read but still want to learn something, *Humanish* may be the book for you! **Overall rating: 4/5.**

Review by Emily Bernhardt, Empathy Network Strategist at Woodland Park Zoo

*Have you recently read something or engaged with content that has an empathy connection, and you want to share with this community? **Submit your recommendations, reviews, or thoughts for a future newsletter addition!***

EMPATHY MATTERS

— ACE FOR WILDLIFE® NETWORK —

JULY 2026



Hello everyone!

Hoping everyone is soaking up the season! Summer is in full swing filled with camps, special programs, and exciting guest connections. Here's what's happening across the Network:

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

Help us nominate our Most Valuable Resource: Across the Network, we have had incredible contributions to our resource library, and we want your help recognizing a “most valuable resource.” If there is a resource that stands out for you, please take a few minutes to [fill out this nomination form](#).

Empathy Photo Contest: Our 2026 Empathy Photo Contest is live, and we have some exciting updates to the competition! Open to anyone in our Network, this contest is an opportunity to showcase your unique perspective on empathy between animals and people. You can [learn about the details of this contest here](#) and help us spread the word by sending [this flyer](#) to your contacts. Submit your photos now through September 15th.

Reminder: [Apply to be in our second cohort of Empathy Champions](#): Empathy Champions design and lead outreach projects that engage new partners and audiences in empathy for wildlife. We are looking for 10 active Network participants to join this professional development opportunity which you can [learn more about here](#) or [register for our office hours on July 20th, 1pm PST](#).

Extension for our Summit proposal review WG – Due July 17th: We are still seeking around 3 individuals to review and select presentation proposals for the Empathy Summit. These representatives' registration fees for the Empathy Summit will be waived. Our call for proposals is also open! [Visit our Summit information page for more details](#).

AI Parameters: You've probably been hearing about AI everywhere, and it's been on our minds too. Thanks to the Steering Committee, we've developed guidelines and parameters for AI usage within the Network, [now available in our resource library](#). If you contribute resources or participate in other Network activities, please take a moment to familiarize yourself with the document.

Resource Feature: [Empathy Toward Animals | Documenting Measurement Instruments Used in Research and Practice](#)

We have another paper for you all developed by some of our Network Superstars! This paper examines the measurement landscape of empathy toward animals by identifying and describing tools used in both academic research and conservation practice.

Check out our Q2 Committee updates [here](#).

Forests for All: Woodland Park Zoo Debuts their Brand-New Forest Trailhead Building



This May, Woodland Park Zoo (located in Seattle, WA) welcomed visitors into one of its most ambitious projects yet: Forest Trailhead, a building dedicated entirely to the global movement for forest conservation. As part of the zoo's broader Forests for All campaign, this new building is a space where naturalistic habitats meet modern, sustainable architecture, and where each animal habitat and interpretive display reinforces the importance of protecting forests globally, and in our own backyard.

The journey begins high above the ground on a sky-high canopy trail, where wooden boardwalks wind through the treetops alongside Matschie's tree kangaroos from Papua New Guinea and red pandas from the Eastern Himalayas. Visitors have been quick to notice the almost "animal playground" feel, as tunnels to climb through and no shortage of perches naturally invite guests to take the perspective of what it might be like to live amongst the trees. Descending to mid-level, visitors meet New Zealand's kea, one of the most clever and investigative alpine parrots in the world. The lower inside level opens into a gallery of African, Asian, and Australasian reptiles, amphibians, and fish, representing around 20 colorful species that offer an up-close, observational look at even more ambassadors of the forest.

The building itself is a exemplifies the zoo's conservation values. Forest Trailhead is targeting LEED Gold certification and incorporates bird-safe windows, solar panels, on-site stormwater management, and biophilic design principles throughout. Indigenous art and interpretation are also woven into the experience, honoring communities actively leading conservation efforts including the [Lummi Nation](#) and Papua New Guinea's [Yopno-Uruwa-Som](#) communities, whose cultural exchange of ancestral knowledge, stories, songs, and strength in sovereignty is a living part of the exhibit.

What truly sets Forest Trailhead apart is its signage approach, thoughtfully designed to build genuine empathy. Displays highlight individual animals by name, sharing their personalities and the specific care they receive from routine health check-ups to physical therapy. "Who Do You Relate To?" signs invite guests to find themselves in creatures ranging from tiny frogs to red pandas. A Listen to the Forest installation also allows visitors to tune into distinct soundscapes from Washington forests, fostering a deeper connection to local green spaces. Conservation action signage makes tangible asks, particularly around paper use while a Tree Equity display connects urban canopy coverage to community health and climate resilience. Other panels explore what it means to honor native treaties, spotlight the zoo's conservation partnerships in Nepal and Papua New Guinea, and ask visitors directly: what role can we each play in upholding the commitments we've made to the land and to one another?

This is a building that not only beautifully connects visitors to wildlife, but asks us to act on behalf of it, challenging every visitor to find their place in the story of the world's forests.



Up close with Rocket, the male Tree Kangaroo at Forest Trailhead.



On the new skybridge with animal overpass.

The Magic of Natural Behavior: Dakota Zoo's Animal Program Creating Empathy for Prairie Animals



Imagine you're at an animal program featuring prairie dogs, looking at a table with a replica of their habitat. You think it's a simple model, but suddenly, a prairie dog peeks their head out of a burrow before ducking back inside. Shortly after, a ferret emerges from a neighboring hole, as if by magic, and you find yourself wondering: Where did those come from? This simple habitat model has become a story about two species important to North Dakota that helps guests understand a different side of wildlife through themes of disappearance, survival, and connection.



Up close with a black-footed ferret.

The black-footed ferret is one of North Dakota's most significant yet overlooked wildlife conservation stories. This species once had a familiar presence on the state's grasslands, but ferret populations began to collapse as prairie dogs were widely eliminated to make way for ranching and agriculture. Long viewed as a nuisance for the damage they cause to ranch lands, prairie dogs became the target of widespread removal efforts. Since prairie dogs make up the vast majority of a ferret's diet, the ripple effect has been profound and resulted in the absence of documented black-footed ferret presence in North Dakota today.

The education team at Dakota Zoo wanted to bring this story to life in a memorable way by giving two prairie dog ambassadors and three domestic ferret ambassadors their chance in the spotlight. Using impressive in-house design, the team built a life-sized, realistic prairie dog mound that mounts directly to a table, complete with hidden entry and exit points sized for both species. These openings connect to the animals' holding spaces beneath the table, cleverly concealed by a tablecloth. The result is an interactive exhibit that lets guests witness natural behaviors up close, which would otherwise be missed by most people who only get a glimpse of life out on the open prairie.

For many North Dakotans, prairie dogs have long been associated with pest control concerns and ranching headaches. Programs like this one are vital precisely because they offer guests the chance to simply watch one, giving them the chance to change their minds about these creatures. When these animals emerge and showcase their natural behaviors, an immediate connection forms, translating directly into deeper learning and leaving guests with a genuine understanding of just how intertwined the lives of prairie dogs and black-footed ferrets truly are.

Based on early success, the team is already looking ahead and considering training the prairie dogs to "bark" on cue and teaching the ferrets to stand tall on the mound which would bring even more authentic prairie flair to an already compelling program. And for any organization inspired to try something similar, the Dakota Zoo team suggests being open-minded about which animals you feature. Don't assume an animal isn't trainable, and don't underestimate their ability to generate real awe and wonder in guests.

Curious to learn more about this program? Reach out to the education team at educate@dakotazoo.org!

EMPATHY MATTERS

ACE FOR WILDLIFE® NETWORK

AUGUST 2026



Greetings, everyone!

We're well into summer, and we hope you're all feeling energized as we approach the finish line to another busy season of camps, events, and summer programs. Here in Seattle, we've gotten a little extra boost from our new hometown hero, Jimothy, the raccoon who has now become a nationwide legend. He's been a fun reminder that animals have a unique ability to bring people joy and connection in the middle of busy lives. Something we already know well in this Network!

If you're new to Team Jimothy, you should definitely [check him out here](#). And while we're at it, we've also got plenty happening across the ACE for Wildlife Network to share with you this month.

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

Photo competition reminder: Our third empathy photo competition launched last month, and we are accepting submissions through September 15th. Learn more and [submit your photos here](#).

Podcast interest survey: We are creating a podcast for the Network that shares the stories of the people and projects at the heart of our mission! Please [fill out this quick survey](#) to share some ideas on how we can build a successful podcast.

Last chance to [apply to be in our second cohort of Empathy Champions](#): We are looking for 10 active Network participants to join this professional development opportunity which you can [learn more about here](#). Applications close August 7th.

Help us nominate our Most Valuable Resource: We are still looking for "most valuable resource" nominations. If there is a resource that stands out for you, please take a few minutes to [fill out this nomination form](#) by the end of this month.

Resource Feature: [Empathy and Storytelling Toolkit](#)

Across the Network, we are actively exploring not just how to tell stories, but why storytelling matters in conservation work. This toolkit is designed to support that exploration. It offers a shared foundation, practical framing guidance, and real-world examples from across the Network to help organizations tell stories that are ethical, engaging, and effective.

We have several events on the horizon! Make sure to check them out and [register on our events page](#).

Small Animal, Huge Impact: The Case for Rats



We've covered plenty of non-charismatic species in this newsletter, but this might be the final boss: **rats**. As a gardener, I've spent years protecting my veggies from them, and I'll be the first to admit I have my own reservations. But after talking with Jessica Hartmann, Director of Education at Staten Island Zoo, I may be coming around, and she's doing the same for guests at her zoo.

Jessica grew up owning rats and has been a longtime fan of them since she was young. So when she discovered [APOPO](#), an organization that trains "HeroRATs" to detect landmines and diseases like tuberculosis, she knew she'd found the story she needed to tell. Seven years ago, she made the case to add Norway rats to the zoo's ambassador animal lineup. Once approved, she had the perfect combination to match the faces to the stories and finally change the script on rats.

Telling this story has largely taken place in school programs that the zoo is involved with, and it can be an uphill battle, especially since New Yorkers aren't exactly rat enthusiasts to begin with. To counter this, Jessica, along with the Zoo's educators and docents, start small by introducing guests to the Zoo's ambassador rats. These little creatures with big personalities have been known to ride her shoulder and, occasionally, meticulously clean their own faces with a cuteness that's hard to resist.



Then, they weave in the story of HeroRATs to start winning over the skeptics. Guests are often shocked to learn that clearing a minefield the size of a tennis court can take a human two weeks, but a rat does it in 30 minutes. Or there's the story of screening sputum samples for tuberculosis: a lab technician might need four days, but a trained rat can check 100 samples in 20 minutes with greater accuracy than humans, a major boost for early detection of one of the world's deadliest diseases. Add search-and-rescue work and wildlife trafficking detection, and suddenly there's a room full of (rat)ical converts!



Rats Remy and Emilie eating snacks & another rat exploring on Jessica's arm.

Several years in, surveys show the programming is shifting attitudes and building genuine empathy, not just tolerance. One particular comment stated, "We all walked away with a different appreciation of rats and their capabilities." The zoo now houses two Gambian pouch rats, Remy and Emillie, the same species APOPO trains, deepening the connection for guests.

When asked what other zoos could do to participate in this kind of programming, Jessica suggested reaching out to APOPO directly, as the partnership is more accessible than people assume. The organization also shares helpful husbandry and training methods. Beyond that, it comes down to finding that one compelling story and leaning into a little critical anthropomorphism to build connections with guests.

I also couldn't miss the opportunity to ask Jessica her favorite thing about rats, to which she shared their personalities, their eagerness to learn, and their unmatched ability to change minds. Feeling inspired? Jessica welcomes emails at jhartmann@statenilandzoo.org.

Written by Sarah Pancioli

Banana Slug Summer: How Northwest Trek Makes Banana Slugs the Stars of Summer



Sometimes some of our most important species in the Pacific Northwest don't get nearly enough attention, but Northwest Trek Wildlife Park in Eatonville, Washington is turning that around with a slime-forward celebration! Slug Fest, the park's beloved annual event, has been teaching visitors about banana slugs since 1983 and has since become a community gem and a way to give these underappreciated creatures the spotlight they deserve.

So what is Slug Fest all about? The event has evolved a lot over four decades, but slug races have always been a staple. In its earliest years, guests would find their own slug to compete in the race. That tradition lives on today through human slug races, where guests channel their inner mollusk by dressing up as slugs, tentacles and all, sliding their way to the finish line in a slimy slip-n-slide showdown. Talk about perspective-taking!

But Slug Fest is about more than just fun and games. Through Keeper Chats, hands-on activities, and park-wide signage, visitors learn about banana slugs' vital role as forest decomposers, how they navigate the world through senses and slime, and how humans can coexist with them, including natural ways to deter slugs from gardens without causing them harm. As Naturalist Nicole Hennigan explains, the event invites guests to see the world from a slug's point of view: "We promote empathy for banana slugs by giving guests the opportunity to take the perspective of slugs and see how even slugs have agency in their choices for survival."



Children dressed up as banana slugs during Slug Fest!

This year's event drew a strong crowd despite chilly, wet weather (a slug's ideal temp, if not ours!) and got an extra boost from a local TV appearance on Tacoma's Cityline program. Slug Fest is also an all-hands-on-deck effort, bringing together staff and volunteers from Animal Care, Nature Engagement, Facilities, and beyond.

When asked what other zoos and aquariums could learn from the event, Nicole summed it up best: "Through empathy, any animal can be the star of the weekend... It is a perfect blend of creativity and education and allows each department to do what is in their capacity to slime — I mean shine."

Want to learn more or bring a similar event to your organization? Contact Nicole Hennigan at Northwest Trek: Nicole.hennigan@nwtrek.org or visit nwtrek.org/event/slug-fest.