

# 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 DEAL Initiatives and Effective Empathy Practices:](#) This resource, created by the DEAL committee, highlights the relationship between effective empathy practices and DEAL 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.

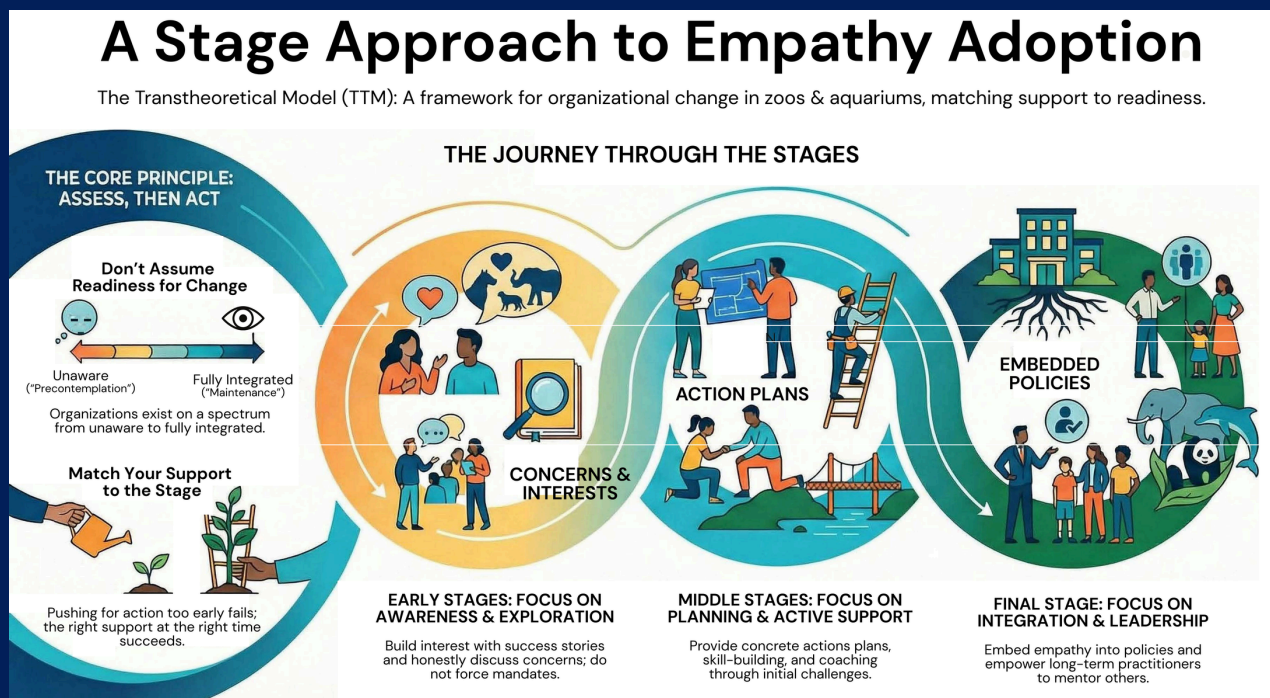
**Preparation** is the stage where intention becomes tangible. Organizations are actively planning to integrate empathy into their work and asking practical questions: Where do we start? Who should be involved? What does success look like?

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](mailto: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



(Katie Cotterill) Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium

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 31<sup>st</sup>! 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**

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**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.



Example of Bronx Zoo's *World of Darkness* signage

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 douroucouli (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.