

Ambassador Animal Program Report

submitted June 2024

Introduction

The Forest Preserves of Cook County's ambassador animal program provides a home for animals that cannot live in the wild and advances the Forest Preserves' mission to educate the public about the importance of nature here in Cook County. By having animals in our care and on view for the public, residents can learn how the Forest Preserves' restoration and stewardship efforts make the preserves a better home for these animals and how the public can best co-exist with them.

For decades, the Forest Preserves of Cook County has maintained live animal exhibits as ambassador animals at five of its six nature centers. Each year, tens of thousands of Cook County residents learn about these native animals and their importance to the local ecosystems through visits and educational programming with these animals. The Forest Preserves is deeply committed to providing the highest possible standard of care for its animals and keeping pace with best practices. Understanding the needs, care and welfare of captive wild animals is a rapidly evolving field, as is evaluating how these animals help to advance education and conservation goals.

In 2022, the Forest Preserves' department of Conservation and Experiential Programming (CEP) began a strategic planning process to review its goals and operations. The report that was created covers insights and opportunities for new protocols across the Forest Preserves' ambassador animal program in the following areas: accreditation, animal acquisition, monitoring health and behavior, stress, habitat and enclosure, enrichment, animal training, choice and control, and staffing and procedures.

This report gave the Forest Preserves the ability to assess and reflect upon the current practices within the ambassador animal program. In 2023, changes and improvements were made to reflect the goals and commitments from the 2022 [Review of the Ambassador Animal Program](#). In 2024, FPCC will continue to improve upon the work completed and documented below.

In many cases, Forest Preserves procedures and standards are within best practices in the field. There are always opportunities to improve and renew our work – animal care is always changing and evolving. The Forest Preserves' ambassador animal report recommends ten changes across the animal ambassador program, in three broad categories: Reorient Framework of Thought, Modify Existing Practices, and Systematize Operations.

A working plan was created to address areas for improvement in each of the categories. We have completed action items in all categories and subcategories. Ongoing evaluation of the program will continue, and improvements will continue to be made over time.

With the ongoing improvements, we are confident that the program will not only be at the forefront of ambassador animal best practices, but it will also have a system in place to remain among the best for decades to come.

Summary

This report will detail the accomplishments made to the Ambassador Animal Program since 2022's *Review of the Ambassador Animal Program*. We reached nearly every action item during this timeframe. Some items continue to be ongoing, while others are in progress. 2023 was just the beginning as we continue to create steppingstones to improve and build upon our Ambassador Animal Program. For 2024, the overall goals are the same, but the strategies and actions have been updated for the new year.

Completed projects

- Review and Modify Animal Enclosures
 - o Coyote enclosure construction
 - o Internal assessment of animal enclosures
- Individualized Health and Wellness Plans
 - o Animal dossiers
- Expand and Deepen Enrichment
 - o Staff training
 - o Enrichment policy and approval process
- Reorient Staffing
 - o Hired CEP Deputy Director and Ambassador Animal Program Coordinator (AAPC)
 - o Professional development opportunities for staff
- “Animals First” Approach
 - o Staff training visits to Willowbrook Wildlife Center, Brookfield Zoo, and Cosley Zoo
 - o Animal welfare and quality of life assessment process
- Focus Educational Goals
 - o Written guidelines for taking animals off-site for education programming
- Modify Acquisition Process
 - o Finalized and updated acquisition guidelines and approval process
- Formalize Manual and Systems
 - o Record keeping and reporting systems in place
 - o Animal monitoring tool obtained
- Conduct Ongoing Evaluation of Ambassador Animal Program
 - o Completed 2023 year-end review

Ongoing

- Staff training opportunities that will improve skills and expertise
- Evaluation of Ambassador Animal Program

In progress

- Work to obtain American Humane certification
- Update program plans for each program that incorporates ambassador animals
- Create interpretation goals for each animal in dossier

Detailed Changes to Operations in 2023

Modify Existing Practices

Review and modify Animal Enclosures

- In the Summer of 2023, the new enclosure for the coyote at River Trail Nature Center was completed. Since this improvement, the coyote continues to show positive signs of animal welfare including exhibition of natural behaviors that coyotes would display in their native habitats.
- Nature Centers have improved enclosure design due to staff trainings and newly implemented Substrate and Décor Guidelines. Staff have been trained to implement more dynamic animal enclosures including different substrates, lighting, elevations, and enclosure furniture. This increases animal welfare by improving staff knowledge and input.
- Ambassador animal enclosure assessment was completed by AAPC. AAPC has experience in enclosure assessment and design and has helped in the design process of new buildings and enclosures at AZA facilities, where animal spaces are designed with both animal welfare and guest experience in mind. CEP Management has created a list of priorities from this assessment and will continue to address these throughout 2024.
- Funding in CIP for 2024 and 2025.



COYOTE IN NEW ENCLOSURE AT RIVER TRAIL NATURE CENTER

Individualized health and wellness plans

- Dossiers were finalized for every animal. These animal profiles are known by staff and include each animal's medical information, dietary needs, and how this specific animal communicates "choice."

Expand and deepen enrichment

- An enrichment policy and approval process was created, finalized, and implemented.



BLACK RAT SNAKE IN NATURAL ENRICHMENT ITEM AT CRABTREE NATURE CENTER

- Forest Preserves of Cook County is committed to providing innovative, creative, and adaptively relevant forms of enrichment to all animals within the ambassador animal program through a behavior-based system that is fundamentally integrated into animal care. The enrichment program facilitates the expression of species-typical behaviors and promotes psychological well-being through physical exercise, manipulative activities, and cognitive challenges according to species-specific behavioral characteristics.
- AAPC lead in-person trainings to staff on the benefits of enrichment, as well as encourage staff to create new and innovative enrichment opportunities for the ambassador animals. Enrichment webinars were also made available to staff through various, reputable animal care organizations.

Reorient Framework of Thought

“Animals First” approach

- Animal welfare is evaluated on a continuum from poor to good. By introducing an animal welfare assessment process, we measure our animals’ welfare status on a singular sliding scale. This equates to overall better wellbeing for the ambassador animals within the Forest Preserves of Cook County.
- Staff continue to improve their skills through in person and online trainings, continuing the forward momentum of our animal care program. Our relationships and collaborations with partners like Willowbrook Wildlife Center, Brookfield Zoo Chicago, and Cosley Zoo will continue beyond 2023.



FPCC STAFF OBSERVING A SONGBIRD TRAINING SESSION AT COSLEY ZOO

Focus educational goals.

- This is an ongoing project, but we have made meaningful strides to focus our educational goals. We are drafting consistent and unified language for our public signage and educational messaging.
- We have added program goals to individual dossiers and utilized our finalized guidelines for taking animals off-site for educational programming. These changes have created consistency and cohesion throughout our animal ambassador program.

Modify acquisition process.

- We updated and finalized the acquisition guidelines and approval process. This includes added policies regarding the collection of animals for short term, long term, and abandoned animals, as well as a refined process for Nature Centers to submit requests for animal acquisitions. The updated guidelines do not make any major changes to operations, but they do codify our approach for consistency.

Systematize Operations

Reorient staffing.

- The Forest Preserves has hired a Deputy Director and Ambassador Animal Program Coordinator (AAPC) to bring in new animal care experience. This has provided additional support, focus, and direction for the ambassador animal program.



A BIRD OF PREY FOOT BEING EXAMINED BY STAFF DURING A ROUTINE NAIL TRIM

- Staff training opportunities were provided virtually or in person by AAPC with topics including USDA standards and regulations, animal care record keeping and terminology, and bird of prey beak and nail care, which includes proper restraint procedures so that staff can safely and efficiently handle the birds to reduce stress.

- A staff orientation and training has been created for all new CEP staff to have a better understanding of the Ambassador Animal Program and its purpose. The AAPC presents this information to new staff during their onboarding process and can give all CEP staff better base knowledge and understanding of our program.
- Professional development opportunities were made available to increase staff knowledge and skills. Multiple staff attended the virtual Ambassador Bird Welfare Workshop hosted by Zoo Atlanta (AZA accredited facility). The AAPC attended the AZA professional development course “Animal Welfare: Evidence Based Management” at Brookfield Zoo to improve care and welfare standards within the FPCC.

Formalize manual and systems.

- A new record-keeping system has been implemented. The program - Animal Care Software – allows staff to keep digital records of food consumption, behavioral changes and observations, animal weights, training and enrichment, medical observations, and more. All staff have received training from AAPC to utilize this software.
- New animal monitoring tool has been obtained. Zoo Monitor, created by Lincoln Park Zoo, will give behavioral data about animal activity budgets and locations during the day. Training for staff planned for 2024.

Obtain American Humane Conservation Certification

- We are updating the partnership agreement by the board and are working with American Humane on an assessment and arraignment. Once that is in process, American Humane asks its partners to not discuss progress until a determination about the certification has been made.

Conduct ongoing evaluation of Ambassador Animal program.

- This will be ongoing for the program.

Goals for 2024

Utilizing the same base goals from the Ambassador Animal Working Plan, the Ambassador Animal Program Coordinator and CEP Management have created new 2024 goals, keeping in mind best practices and animal wellbeing.

Modify Existing Practices

Review and modify Animal Enclosures

- Continued improvement of animal enclosures where needed using the priority list that has been created. CEP is currently working with Planning & Development and Facilities to carry out changes. Small enclosure modifications and improvements will continue to take place (new perching, dynamic enclosures, etc.)

Individualized health and wellness plans

- Implement routine welfare assessment schedule. The goal is to have a welfare assessment completed for each animal or group on an annual basis to create baseline animal welfare data.
- Continue to implement best practices to improve animal wellbeing.
- Creation of additional dossiers is a part of our acquisition process.

Expand and deepen enrichment.

- Enrichment calendars and schedules will help provide direction and plans for regular animal enrichment.
- Staff training on enrichment and safety will take place. A workshop will be available for staff to also learn how to make new enrichment items.

Reorient Framework of Thought

“Animals First” approach

- AAPC will offer staff training opportunities to gain more experience in voluntary participation, animal handling, and animal stress signs that are consistent amongst centers.
- Staff visits to other local animal care facilities for improved networking and learning opportunities.

Focus educational goals.

- New signage indoors and outdoors to create consistent and engaging messaging for our guests within the Forest Preserves
- Animal fact sheets to improve consistency in programming

Modify acquisition process.

- Acquire new ambassador animals utilizing the approved acquisition policy and approval process.

Systematize Operations

Reorient staffing.

- Hire and onboard Animal Care focused positions, Ambassador Animal Specialists, to create a core animal care team that is focused on animal welfare and improved animal wellbeing throughout the Forest Preserves.

Formalize manual and systems.

- Implement animal monitoring system, include staff training. ZooMonitor will be implemented and utilized on a regular schedule after staff are properly trained to use the program and analyze its data.

Obtain American Humane Conservation Certification

- Working with American Humane on contracting for 5-year arrangement

Conduct ongoing evaluation of Ambassador Animal program.

- Use Guest surveys to determine if messaging has impact with the public.