In November our Zoo family lost its matriarch, Mrs. Sophie Danforth. Sophie founded the Rhode Island Zoological Society, the not-for-profit organization that manages the Zoo, in 1962. When Sophie first came to the Zoo, the animals were spread throughout the park and were housed in what she emphatically stated were “deplorable conditions”. She not only contributed money to improve the infrastructure of the Zoo, but ran a gift shop and sold Zoo memberships to help provide food and care for the animals. She worked with politicians to secure funding and travelled the world to visit other zoos and bring back best practices. Sophie joined the American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums (now the AZA) and befriended some of the world’s greatest conservationists such as Gerald Durrell and William Conway. Because of her, we have become the international conservation organization we are today. It is not an understatement to say that the incredible Zoo that we now have is because of her hard work and vision. When asked how she did it, she said “Well, I had common sense and a love for animals.” Mrs. Sophie Danforth is an inspiration teaching us to make a lasting impact for the betterment of the world. Sophie Danforth will be missed by all of us.

I look forward to seeing you at the Zoo!

By Jeremy Goodman, DVM
Executive Director, RWP Zoo and RI Zoological Society
Griffy was born in 1989 at the National Zoo in Washington, D.C. and first came to RWPZ the following year. For the next 21 years, Griffy called the Zoo’s Plains of Africa exhibit home. In his time in Providence, Griffy sired a total of 10 offspring with mates Sukari and Amber. While many of the offspring were sent off to other AZA institutions, the youngest, Jaffa, still lives at the Zoo. Griffy passed away in March of 2011 and was buried on the URI campus so his skeleton could later be used as an aid in educating the next generation of animal scientists.

According to Lou Perrotti, RWPZ’s director of conservation programs, sometimes there is a silver lining to the tragedy of a zoo animal death: an otherwise scarce opportunity to study exotic specimens firsthand.

After Griffy’s passing, institutions across Rhode Island clamored and competed to get their hands on the giraffe’s remains for zoological research programs. "I remember there was a big fight over that skeleton,” said Perrotti. “But in the end, we decided to donate it to the University of Rhode Island as a teaching tool.” Griffy was buried in a plot of land on campus and left for nearly 6 years in order to give the body tissue time to break down and decompose.

The partnership between the Zoo and URI says Professor of Animal Science Dr. Jason Richard, is mutually beneficial in a number of ways. As part of this partnership, Dr. Richard teaches a Zoo Animal Management course, an immersive class that gives students a behind-the-scenes look at the care and consideration that goes into the operations of a zoo.

“Through engagement with aspiring animal care professionals,” he said, the relationship “enables students to develop knowledge and skills that they can apply in their future careers, while enriching their experience as undergraduates with unique hands-on learning opportunities.”

It’s 8:00 AM on a cold December morning. A group of students stand gathered in a snowy field on the University of Rhode Island (URI) campus, some 25 miles south of Roger Williams Park Zoo (RWPZ). The quiet of the crisp morning air is broken only by the dull crunch of shovels chipping away at the frosty soil. Suddenly, a voice calls out: “I think I found a rib!”

Eager students gather around in awe as the long, thin rib bone is pulled from the soil. Within a few hours’ time (and with the help of some heavy machinery) nearly all the pieces of a hulking skeleton are laid out on the field.

The subject of the morning’s dig: Griffy, an adult male Masai giraffe and longtime resident of Roger Williams Park Zoo.
In December, an eager group of student volunteers joined Perrotti and Richard for a truly unique opportunity: digging up Griffy’s remains.

“When it was decided that it was time to dig up the skeleton,” said Richard, “I mentioned it to the Zoo Animal Management course, and 17 students volunteered to come out in the cold first thing in the morning just to be a part of the excavation.”

Richard said as part of a proposed independent research project, a team of students from various departments and backgrounds may now have the opportunity to piece Griffy’s skeleton back together.

“The team would be challenged to create a multimedia display that would not just show off the skeleton, but also utilize the specimen as a tool to teach viewers of the display about giraffe biology and to communicate the important roles that zoos like RWPZ play in wildlife education, research, and conservation in today’s society.”

According to Richard, the project would teach the students skills important to their scientific studies including collaboration, communication and scholarly research.

But it will not be a simple task.

“This will require research into not just the anatomy, but also the logistics of the rearticulation,” he said, “from cleaning the bones to ultimately displaying them. This will likely require collaboration with students and faculty in Animal Science, Biology, Wildlife Conservation Biology, and Engineering.”

Perrotti said this sort of project serves to underscore the tremendous impact that zoo animals – that Griffy, gone for almost a decade now - is still teaching and motivating scientists today.

“Even after they’re gone,” he said, “the information that we gather from these animals is used not only to better care for animals in captivity but also as valuable intel for conservation initiatives worldwide.”

“It’s remarkable,” Richard added, “to think about how an animal who inspired so many thousands of Zoo visitors in life can continue to serve as an ambassador for his species for many years to come.”
Ever wonder where and how the food the animals eat is prepared? As 2020 began, animal and Zoo staff hailed the opening of a new 3,240 square foot commissary building located near the education building. The new commissary offers storage and a state-of-the-art kitchen as well as large walk-in freezers and walk-in coolers to store fish, meat, and produce. A quick glance around – and a human would think the produce and fish would be perfect for an evening meal. Look a bit closer, and crickets and other specimens only non-humans eat are being prepared.

Until mid-December keepers were preparing the diets of over 160 species in a small area located on the Zoo’s back service road. According to Ian Didow, operations project manager at Roger Williams Park Zoo, “the new commissary is a pre-fab building. It was easier and less costly to construct, and is made of industrial grade materials.” Didow explained that as the Zoo looks at efficient energy sources for much of the new construction happening all over the Zoo, the commissary is saving energy by using a mini-split system - a heating and cooling system that allows the control of temperatures in individual rooms or spaces.

The commissary is a unique construction. Steve Marino of Morton Builders, the company that constructed both the new commissary and the Alex & Ani Farmyard, explains that the company constructed a post-frame building allowing for clear spans up to nearly 100 feet, providing a building with maximum efficiency, limited maintenance, speedy construction and lower construction costs. Marino says that “our construction type can be used anywhere, but there are interesting challenges when working at a zoo. Most of the time we don’t have to deal with the public watching us or walking through our site. And, the Zoo’s commissary required a second floor, where the grain is stored, which is different from some of our other construction.”

While the commissary is a private building and not generally visited by guests, know that healthy meals are prepared daily for every animal at the Zoo.
Winter may be the time of year that most people want to bundle up inside and stay warm, but many animals stay active throughout the colder months. Hang this quick and easy bird feeder outside and see who decides to come by for a snack!

What you need:
• Cardboard tube
• Peanut butter
• Knife
• Birdseed
• Ribbon
• Empty box
• Scissors
• Parental Supervision

Follow these easy steps:
1. Spread a coating of peanut butter over the cardboard tube
2. Pour birdseed into an empty box. There should be a thin layer of seed covering the bottom of the box.
3. Roll the cardboard tube in birdseed so the seeds stick to the peanut butter, covering the tube.
4. Thread a ribbon through the tube and tie ends together into a knot.
5. Hang the feeder outside near your window and watch the birds feast!

Try this:
Keep track of how many different types of birds come to visit the feeder! A birdwatching guide can help you identify each one.

ARCTIC? OR ANTARCTIC?
The part of the world known as the Arctic is made up of the Arctic Ocean plus parts of Alaska, Canada, Finland, Greenland, Iceland, Norway, Russia and Sweden. On the other side of the world, the Antarctic is made up of the frozen continent of Antarctica and the surrounding Southern Ocean. Do you know which of these animals live in the Arctic, and which ones live in Antarctica?

1. Spending most of their time on sea ice, polar bears are the world’s largest land carnivore. During periods of summer ice melt, some polar bears have been known to swim almost 100 miles in search of new territory to hunt for seals. Polar bears can be found in:
   a. The Arctic  b. Antarctica

2. Emperor penguins are the largest species of penguin, with an average height ranging from 44 to 48 inches tall! They huddle close together in large groups to keep themselves, and their friends, warm. You can find emperor penguins on the ice of:
   a. The Arctic  b. Antarctica

3. The walrus is a relative of seals and sea lions that can weigh up to 4000 pounds! Walruses use their long teeth called tusks to fight, show off, and also as hooks to pull itself out of the freezing water and onto the ice. Walrus can be found in:
   a. The Arctic  b. Antarctica

4. The eyes of the colossal squid are the largest of any animal in the world, close to the size of a soccer ball! colossal squid are very rarely seen since they live up to 1000 feet below the surface of the water. Colossal squid can be found deep beneath the ice of:
   a. The Arctic  b. Antarctica

Answers located on bottom of page.

GUESS ZOO?
These photos show close-up views of animals that live in freezing cold environments. Can you identify the animal in each picture?
Answers located on bottom of page.
ADOPT-AN-ANIMAL

Hang out with your favorite Roger Williams Park Zoo animal through our fun symbolic adopt program!

CLICK HERE TO FIND YOUR PERFECT MATCH!

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