



Roger Williams Park Zoo Detailed Timeline

Overview

One of the nation's oldest zoos (opened in 1872), Roger Williams Park Zoo is an integral part of southern New England's history and heritage, bringing excitement and discovery of the natural world to generations of visitors. Today the Zoo is one of Rhode Island's top tourist attractions, welcoming over 700,000 people annually from all over the United States and the world.

The Roger Williams Park Zoo provides visitors the opportunity to see animals from all over the globe – some over a million years old. Naturalistic surroundings are home to over 100 species of animals, including a Komodo dragon and zebra, red pandas, African elephants, Masai giraffes, snow leopards, bears, anteaters, flamingoes, sloths, alligators, and more!

Our award-winning conservation programs have won national acclaim, earning praise from The New York Times as "one of the best zoos in the country for its conservation efforts" among zoos of similar size. YANKEE magazine's Travel Guide to New England selected Roger Williams Park Zoo as "one of the outstanding reasons to visit New England" and Travel & Leisure Family Magazine named Roger Williams Park Zoo "one of America's top ten zoos." The Boston Globe has named Roger Williams Park Zoo, "New England's great zoo."

Roger Williams Park Zoo is also a valuable center for science and environmental education; our standards-based education programs provide invaluable experiential learning to thousands of students every year. Our advocacy efforts have helped shape national environmental education legislation.

Roger Williams Park Zoo is supported and managed by the Rhode Island Zoological Society and is owned by the City of Providence. The Rhode Island Zoological Society is a non-profit organization that works to secure the public and private sector support needed by the Zoo to continue developing new excellent exhibits and making significant contributions to conservation. The Zoo serves the community as a valuable source of environmental education, recreation, and economic development.

Historical Timeline

1871

Betsey Williams bequeathed her 102-acre farm to the City of Providence for public use in memory of her great-great-great-grandfather, Roger Williams, the founder of Providence. At the time, Providence had little open public space, and there was a growing desire to establish places where people could enjoy nature and escape the daily pressures of urban life.

1872

A "menagerie" of small animals and birds was brought to a section of the park so that visitors could get a closer look at wildlife. Raccoons, guinea pigs, white mice, squirrels, rabbits, hawks, peacocks and anteaters were on display. This led to the official designation of this portion of Roger Williams Park as a "zoo."

1890

A Menagerie Building opened, exhibiting a wide variety of exotic creatures including a tiger, a leopard and a pair of lions. The Zoo's first elephant, Roger, joined the Menagerie in 1893. Today, this beautifully restored building houses the Discover the Wild gift shop.

1930

Alice, the Zoo's second elephant and most famous resident moved to a new elephant barn. Thereafter, elephants that joined the Zoo family were named in Alice's honor. Currently, visitors may visit "Alice" in the recently renovated and refurbished elephant exhibit with her two companions, Kate and Ginny. The original elephant barn was converted to a Tropical America building.

Early 1960's

The Zoo continued to grow and include more animals. Most of the animals were still scattered throughout the park in nondescript areas. Sea lions lived in a pool on a hillside below the Casino, while bison, deer and bears were housed behind crude fences on park grounds. There were no admission gates or naturalistic habitats as a 21st-century visitors' experience.

1962

Sophie Danforth established the Rhode Island Zoological Society (RIZS), the nonprofit organization that continues to support and maintain the Zoo. A Providence resident and wildlife enthusiast, Danforth remains one of the Zoo's greatest champions. Her vision for what the Zoo could be with the help of the Rhode Island Zoological Society ushered in a period of tremendous change and growth for the Zoo.

1965

Thanks to funding raised through the Rhode Island Zoological Society, the Zoo's animals moved inside a newly fenced compound for greatly improved security, maintenance, and husbandry conditions.

1978

The Zoo closed to embark upon major upgrades.

1980

The Zoo enjoyed a "rebirth" opening with a new nature center, the iconic polar bear exhibit, a boardwalk through a native wetlands area, and a field for North American bison. Exhibits exemplified the new emphasis on naturalistic enclosures for collection animals.

Dozens of new exhibits opened, and restoration of the Zoo's beautiful historic buildings and attraction of nationally recognized top-quality staff in education and animal care becomes a major focus of the Zoo's strategic plan.

1986

Roger Williams Park Zoo was the first zoo in New England to earn accreditation from the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA).

1990's

The rebirth continued through the late 1980s and into the 1990s with the opening of The African Fishing Village, Elephant / Giraffe Pavilion and Plains of Africa (1989-1991), a new cheetah exhibit (1993), The Marco Polo Trail (1996) and Australasia – Where Worlds Collide Where Worlds Divide (2000). In addition, the Zoo staged a major robotic dinosaur seasonal exhibit in 1992, 1994, 1997 and 2000, each time boosting attendance by more than an additional 100,000.

2001-2006

At the start of the 21st century, the Zoo embarked on an aggressive strategic planning process and master plan to assure the Zoo would continue to exemplify best practices in animal care, conservation and environmental education for many years to come, and to improve the visitor experience. The master plan was formally completed and adopted in March 2001. A number of significant private donations and grants were secured, and voters approved a \$4 million bond in 2004 to help with initial improvements to the elephant/giraffe facilities. An operating agreement and lease were signed between the City and Society in 2005 that fully transitioned management of the Zoo to the Society. In 2006 a capital campaign was announced, and voters approved an \$11 million bond.

2005

The zoo's iconic polar bear exhibit closed, and ultimately converted into a splendid new American bald eagle exhibit, adding a new species to the collection of conservation success stories featured in the North American exhibit area.

2007

A giant anteater exhibit was added to the Tropical America area, pathways were improved, and new interpretive signage and a docent exploration station were completed to focus on animal adaptations. The Feinstein Junior Scholar New England Wetlands Trail was significantly improved with new boardwalks and bridges raised above flood level as well as new interpretive signage and a docent exploration station along the trail.

2008

The major overhaul of the Fabric of Africa exhibit was completed, with the addition of wild dogs, wildebeests that share the enclosure with zebras, a significantly enhanced elephant yard, and a renovated and expanded Textron Elephant and Giraffe Pavilion.

2009

Preliminary utility work for a new veterinary hospital and future exhibits was completed. The ground was broken for Hasbro's *Our Big Backyard*, a nature play and exploration area for children and their families.

2011

The John J. Palumbo Veterinary Hospital, dedicated by Sophie Danforth and her daughter Stephanie Chaffee, was completed. It featured 55% more square footage than the previous facility and appropriate and separate facilities for each medical function. The setting for the new hospital was removed from other zoo operations, providing a quieter area for the care of sick and quarantined animals as well as

excellent access to a dedicated service road and secured gate.

2012

Hasbro's Our Big Backyard opened. This outdoor play and exploration area includes the CVS Health Treehouse; a greenhouse for education programs and a variety of events; Our House, with education program space, and The Nature Swap, a "trading post" that fosters interaction with nature; plus a "backyard" with a number of unstructured play areas. In addition, three new animal exhibits opened featuring the Sichuan takin, king vulture, and red river hogs. These are currently the only representatives of each species on exhibit in New England.

2013

The Zoo's first venomous snake exhibit opened in the spring to showcase the timber rattlesnake species, the focus of one of the Zoo's important conservation initiatives.

The hillside next to Hasbro's Our Big Backyard became the site of an enhanced nature play space. The area, in use today, offers cave structures so children may crawl inside the structure, as well as appropriate climbing and jumping zones. There are "starter-structures" made of logs and branches for fort building with loose materials like sticks, grasses, vines, and burlap that allow children to personalize their special place. Play Partner volunteers maximize unplanned or opportunistic teaching moments with local wildlife living freely in the Zoo. Exploration bins provide tools like magnifying glasses and binoculars to deepen the learning experience. Finally, circle-time areas help patrons and volunteers further explore wildlife, and natural materials.

2014

The summer-long exhibit "Flutterby: Butterflies in Bloom" returned to the Zoo this season. It provided Zoo guests with an immersive experience inside the greenhouse next to the Big Backyard filling the area with hundreds of free-flying butterflies.

Construction on the Outback Trail exhibit was completed. Guests crossed over a rustic bridge, and along a path through the middle of the Zoo's kangaroo and wallaby exhibit, and among the animals.

The ALEX AND ANI Farmyard opened with a walkthrough barn to the public, and interactive features like a Contact Yard where people pet and feed goats and sheep. Animals include goats, sheep, Guinea hogs, silver fox rabbits, a miniature donkey, chickens, and barn owls.

2015

In 2014, voters approved a bond issue that allocated \$15 million to the Zoo for future improvements. Phase One of the new Zoo Master Plan stated the Zoo's continuing efforts to exemplify best practices in animal care, conservation, and environmental education while improving the visitor experience. The bond monies are helping to erect a new Rainforest building, and education center with double the capacity of the existing building. The current Meller-Danforth Education Center will become New England's first reptile house.

The Zoo announced Tree Kangaroo Awareness Month to celebrate the opening of its new Matschie's tree kangaroo exhibit in the World of Adaptations building, making the new baby, Holly, visible to the public for the first time. The second phase of the ALEX AND ANI Farmyard opened featuring the Farmhouse Stage, chickens, and Flemish giant rabbits as well as additional interactive play opportunities. Additionally, the Zoo took over the management of Roger Williams Park Carousel Village.

2016

Preparations for the new Rainforest officially began in November. The animals in the Tropical America

building moved to the greenhouse, while the kangaroos and wallabies moved to World of Adaptations and off-exhibit for the renovation.

2017

Construction commenced on the new Rainforest. The Zoo added a Komodo dragon in the World of Adaptations making Elsie the only Komodo dragon in New England. The Soaring Eagle Zip Ride opened offering breathtaking views 115 feet high allowing riders to see out over Providence and into Narragansett Bay in comfortable side-by-side seats. The ride along with the Zoo's new train ride and camel rides are part of the new Explore and Soar area behind Hasbro's Our Big Backyard. Carousel Village also added a train ride as part of the offering to visitors.

2018

The Faces of the Rainforest exhibit opens in November 2018 as part of Phase One of the Zoo's 20-year Master Plan. The beautiful exhibit urges visitors to become a "face" of the Rainforest and learn what steps everyone can take to help protect the flora and fauna of the South American Rainforest.

2019

Construction is underway for new Commissary and Quarantine buildings, and planning for the new Education Center begins. The Zoo receives the 2019 North American Conservation Award from AZA for the New England Cottontail Rabbit and Recovery Program in conjunction with Queens Zoo.

2020

The Zoo's new commissary building is fully operational, allowing for the preparation of healthy, nourishing diets for the over 150 animals that call the Zoo home.

Thanks to support from the city of Providence and Rhode Island Commerce's HART Recovery Grant Program, the Zoo launches its first-ever Holiday Lights Spectacular - soon to become an annual tradition.

2021

Roger Williams Park Zoo partners with Hanart Culture to put on its first Asian Lantern Spectacular-- a walk-through event featuring over 50 dazzling, hand-crafted lantern displays inspired by wildlife and wild places.

Construction is completed on a new Veterinary Quarantine building, allowing new arrivals to the Zoo to acclimate and adjust in a comfortable, state-of-the-art environment.

Conservation Director Lou Perrotti receives the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's prestigious "Recovery Champion" award for his tireless work with the Service, state agencies, and local partners to protect the American burying beetle and to ensure its persistence into the future.

The Greenhouse is once again home to a seasonal exhibit as "Shades of Nature" introduces visitors to Elsa the albino alligator and asks— "Why blend in when you can stand out?"