



Special summer events help drive up attendance at ZooMontana

MIKE FERGUSON *Rediscover Montana* May 15, 2016

It's clear from recent turnout at fun, active events — renaissance festivals, Scottish Highland games, even a kids' competition to determine who can operate the best lemonade stand — that the humans are reasserting themselves at ZooMontana.

It's a desired development, says ZooMontana Executive Director Jeff Ewelt, and it's helping zoo officials to fund needed facilities, including a new pavilion that will be able to shade up to 300 event-goers. The pavilion is expected to be ready in July.

During a tour of the zoo he's worked to strengthen over the last five years, Ewelt said that summertime special events have performed well beyond staff expectations.

"We will be expecting maybe 500 people, and 2,000 will show up," he said. "Our attendance has been almost scary."



More than 100,000 visitors made their way through zoo turnstiles in 2015, and Ewelt expects 120,000 visitors in 2016. He believes it won't be long before a quarter-million people annually take in all the attractions and the special events that the zoo, at 2100 S. Shiloh Road, has to offer.

"These special events really help drive our attendance," he said. "We've noticed a spike without a doubt. They've created a community gathering space."

April and May are dominated by the school field trip crowd. About 10,000 students from schools in Montana and Wyoming visit the zoo during those two months.

After that, a growing number of event-goers take advantage of the zoo's grounds, its many volunteers who help make the events possible and an ambiance that can't be found anywhere else.

One of the most popular summer events is the Montana Renaissance Festival, set for June 4-5. A car show with the catchy name ZoomMontana will be offered June 11, and two weeks later, on June 25, those who appreciate Scottish athletic prowess will enjoy the Highland Games.

On Family Fun Day July 24, children will be treated to demonstrations by a wandering magician, the thrill of a bounce house and the zoo's new playground.

Five evenings earlier, on July 19, the zoo will be a place for adults only during ZooFair, where burgers, brews and bands will focus the attention of those 21 and older.

"We are multi-generational, meaning an 80-year-old grandmother can enjoy the zoo as much as her 5-year-old grandson," Ewelt said. "I always find that to be a real perk of our organization."

The Summerland Tour 2016, hosted by 11:11 presents, will feature Sugar Ray, Everclear, Lit and Sponge performing an outdoor show on Aug. 3.

Gates open at at 5 p.m. and the show begins at 6 p.m. Tickets are \$37 in advance, \$40 at the gate and are available at 1111presents.com, Pub Station Box Office, 2502 First Ave. N., ZooMontana or by calling (877) 987- 6487.

Youth will return to power Aug. 6 during LemonZOOade Day. Children will build and staff lemonade stands and judges will reward those with the tastiest products.

The summer schedule is also dotted with dozens of wedding rehearsals and wedding ceremonies.

With the boost in visitors come new animal exhibits, Ewelt said. A breeding pair of wolverines will arrive from Europe late in the year, and habitat is being prepared in anticipation of their arrival.

A webcam trained on grizzly bears Ozzy and Bruno gives people 24/7 access to the bruins' antics. [The Bear Cam](#) has been rated by its supplier, [EarthCam](#), as one of the 10 best zoo cameras in the world.



Three takin, a goat-antelope normally found in the Himalaya Mountains, are expected in May.

“They’re a Dr. Seuss-looking animal,” Ewelt said. “They’ve got a moose nose and a goat body.”

That large nose warms the takin’s sinuses, which allows the critter to more easily breathe frosty mountain air. Like the Siberian tigers at the zoo, Ewelt predicts a pleasant stay for the takins, especially headed into the cooler weather this fall.

Ewelt said there are enough long-term projects to keep staff and contractors busy for years to come, including paving the parking lot and, through a partnership with ExxonMobil, repairing the plumbing and the concrete in the tigers’ moat so that it can once again hold enough water to cool the Siberian felines on hot days.

“We have that trust and credibility back,” Ewelt said. “People know that we’re not in debt anymore, and they’re excited about that and about our future.”