

Popular ZooLights helps Oregon Zoo to record-breaking 2006

by Bend Weekly News Sources

The Oregon Zoo broke its all-time calendar-year record in 2006, with 1,447,116 visitors -- the highest attendance in the zoo's 120-year history. This is a 7 percent increase over the previous record, set in 2004, when the zoo attracted 1,350,952 visitors.

A record number of ZooLights visitors helped the zoo surpass its previous milestone. From Nov. 25 to Dec. 31, attendance for ZooLights alone reached 130,603. This trumped the previous year's ZooLights attendance by 44,849 visitors.

"Each year, more and more people make ZooLights one of their holiday traditions," says Tony Vecchio, zoo director. "We're always trying to make new and innovative additions to draw in first-time visitors, and bring back our loyal supporters."

Vecchio added that a number of new exhibits and special events, along with creative marketing and public relations, helped the zoo garner strong media coverage, which translated into more visitors.

The zoo had a strong spring with the opening of its Visayan warty pig exhibit in March and its "Zoo's Gone Wild" spring break activities. Summer was equally busy with the return of the Winged Wonders butterfly exhibit combined with the well-attended Wells Fargo Summer Concert Series. With the late-summer openings of two cat exhibits -- cougars and ocelots -- August was the zoo's busiest month, with 218,149 visitors.

Winter also brought media interest, with the December unveiling of the zoo's new ocelot kitten, Rio.

"Even before he was named, Rio was creating a great buzz," says Vecchio. "Our YouTube video of his first health check-up was our most popular video ever, with over 10,000 viewings."

After a record-breaking 2006, the zoo's director anticipates an even better year for 2007.

"We have big plans for 2007," says Vecchio. "Our Black Bear Ridge exhibit, featuring black bears and bobcats, opens this March. It's the final, \$2-million piece for our stunning \$36-million Great Northwest exhibit. In May, we'll bring Portland another charismatic pig, when babirusas join our Island Pigs of Asia exhibit. Our visitors will have a lot to see in the coming year."

The first time the zoo's attendance topped 1 million was during 1962, the year Packy was born. The baby pachyderm, born that April, helped draw 1,211,170 spectators from all over the Northwest, eager to see the first elephant born in the United States in 44 years. It wasn't until 1989 that the zoo broke the 1 million mark again. Since then, the zoo has welcomed more than a million guests in 15 of the past 18 years.

The Oregon Zoo continues to have the highest attendance of any fee-based tourist attraction in Oregon. Only Multnomah Falls, which does not charge an admission fee, has more annual visitors.

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