

Little River Zoo:

Where the Once-Wild Things Are

YOU GRADUATE JANET SCHMID
TOOK A SLICE OF BLACKJACK FOREST
AND CREATED A PLACE WHERE ANIMALS
CAN LIVE AND HUMANS CAN LEARN.

BY KATHRYN JENSON WHITE

In Janet Schmid's world, scorpion stings and gnat nips are nothing. Monkey munches and burro bites are what a woman has to watch out for.

"I don't remember ever being afraid of any animal as a child, but later in life I've had some eye-opening experiences," says the person responsible for dreaming up Norman's Little River Zoo and, over the last 12 years, making it real. A scar on her hand commemorates the monkey's biting ways, and a much more impressive one a few inches below her neck reminds her daily of the danger behind the generally charming faces of the more than 400 furred, feathered, gilled and quilled creatures who live in the zoo.

"Our burro tried his best to suffocate me," she recalls. "Their defense is to crush the neck with their jaws to stop the intruder's breathing. Thank goodness he was a short donkey. He got me just below the neck."

Schmid was covering for an absent keeper when she fed donkey before camel. Camel became upset. Schmid turned to

take the donkey's food into the shed to calm the camel. Donkey became more upset than camel.

"He grabbed me in a full-mouth bite and pinned me to the ground for what seemed an eternity," she says. "Someone here heard me screaming, ran into the enclosure and lifted the donkey off me."

Schmid does not hold grudges; Little River Zoo still has the donkey.

"If you get bitten by an animal, it's because you messed up," she insists. "The attack is always the last resort. The donkey bite resulted from human error. In his little donkey mind, he had no options."

continued

Little River Zoo founder Janet Schmid takes time out to offer some encouragement to "Ginger," a mother-in-training. Formerly a pet, the capuchin monkey had trouble raising the 4-week-old offspring clinging to her back and had to be separated from the troop to learn the fine art of motherhood.

PHOTOS BY ROBERT TAYLOR



Schmid, who graduated from the University of Oklahoma in 1983 with a major in public relations, was raised on a Shawnee farm around the standard motley crew of pets and animals destined to be dinner. She remembers the butcher coming to render the cows into steak and her mother killing the main ingredient in Sunday's fried chicken feast. In the woods beyond her house, she poked around rocks to watch bugs and waited quietly to see the occasional possum. This rather ordinary rural-child behavior is at the root of why Schmid came to be a cross between Mother Theresa and Dr. Dolittle as overseer of more than 40 enclosures housing at least 100 species hailing from Malaysia, South Africa and many other foreign lands.

The animals arrive via a variety of routes. Some are abandoned by owners who find them no longer acceptable as pets; some become summer victims when classrooms are no longer full of children to feed them; some outlast their usefulness in laboratory research; some are hurt in the wild or lose their wild parents; some outlive their human families to become pet orphans; and some come from other zoos where they are extras.

Schmid's first small step into the world of unusual animals was buying a potbellied pig. Then the dream that became a 55-acre compound with about 50,000 visitors a year and several significant educational programs really began to take shape, appropriately enough, with a Moonshadow.

"Moonshadow, a European lynx, was our first exotic animal," Schmid says. "My husband, Bill, and I didn't even know that it wasn't legal to have her within the city limits. To be around Moonshadow was an incredible experience. Before owning her, I had been a hardcore animal rights person, who did not believe animals should be in captivity. Then I did what many, many animal lovers do: I saw this amazing exotic creature and wanted her in my life. So I bought her, and she taught me more about animals than I could have imagined."

Moonshadow died when she was seven as a result of a keeper error, something Schmid still finds difficult to discuss. However, after Moonshadow came other

"Jackson," the blind kangaroo, is the object lesson in a story about overcoming adversity that tour guide Kristin Witter shared with Paul Bryan, in yellow shirt, and Joshua Avery, in red, who visited the zoo with a home-school group.

animals until Schmid owned about six small exotic cats. Bill Schmid, also an OU graduate, is a clinical psychologist, and when Janet decided that her public relations position in health care was no longer satisfying, she began using her animals as a component of therapy for his patients.

"I tell this story all the time," she says. "There was this little boy in a lock-up facility that Bill ran. He was 13 or 14 and had been involved in a drive-by shooting. He was going to be in there until he was 18. He had been hurt so much that his defenses were right on the surface. He was one bad little boy. I took my animals in, and he gathered up Giggles, this potbellied pig, and sat in the grass and baby talked and spent the whole time with this pig. It was so moving to be there, to see him be able to let his defenses down and to feel safe."

Schmid paused to fight back tears so she could finish her point.

"He had been identified as a hopeless case by the system, but animals give hope. They provide a way for us to connect with a part of ourselves that the difficulties of life can numb, that society can numb. We're strong believers here in humane education, the belief that we are all part of a bigger picture and that all life is connected."

Recognizing Moonshadow's awesome beauty and Giggles' goofy power to find the best in a troubled child, Schmid decided to create a permanent place in which to experience the animals. In 1990 she moved to the zoo's present location, where Bill had had a house since 1978. They lived in one room of a many-roomed house; animals occupied all the others.

Starting in 1991, they built enclosures among the beautiful trees and lush vegetation of the 4,000-year-old cross timber forest. As the Schmid's built it, the animals came. And came. And came. In 1996, the Little River Zoo opened its doors to the public and began adding human creature comforts such as





AT LEFT: “Della” is a most unusual porcupine. Part of the “petting zoo” educational animals, she was hand-raised at Little River Zoo and is very friendly—but zoo personnel like Cris Bell, the Little River development director, work with her every day to keep her that way. “Don’t pet the eating end” is the zookeepers’ motto.



restrooms and a gift shop. They spent large sums of their personal money—Schmid says the total is far more than a million dollars to date—in carving their zoo out of the woods to accommodate as many animals and animal lovers as possible.

As the facility grew, so did outside funding and involvement. In January 1997, the Little River Zoo became a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. The zoo now has a board of directors dedicated to its oversight and fundraising, and has begun to be the recipient of grants and donations to supplement its small admission charge of \$3 for children and \$4 for adults.

“We had reached the limits of our personal money,” Schmid says. “It was six figures a year. This isn’t a huge place yet, obviously. However, the costs are staggering. We also did not want people to think of us as the weird couple in the woods with all the animals, those eccentric people. We understood that the zoo had to take on its own life—that unless the community bought into it, it wouldn’t make it. After eight years of living in the animal house, we moved out about eight months ago into our own on adjoining property.

“You have to begin to distance yourself as something like this becomes more independent. It’s rather like raising a child.”

While the zoo may be her baby, Schmid does not consider any of the animals her possessions, let alone her children. However, she defends their welfare as fiercely as any animal mother in the wild.

Ultimately, no simple definition exists for either Schmid’s relationship with the animals or the Little River Zoo itself.

“We’re not a sanctuary, and we’re really not a zoo,” Schmid says. “If we were a sanctuary, we’d have 15 cougars or

Tour guide Emily Barringer takes a turn as chef for 400 Little River Zoo residents, working through a mountain of past-prime fruits, vegetables and bread donated by a local supermarket. The commissary—along with winter storage, the OSU veterinary education center and clinic and meeting space—is located in the Animal Services Center, a gift from the Michael and Sheryl Dillard family of Norman.

more living away from humans in their enclosure. We have gotten hundreds of calls to take abandoned ones. But we feel that's not what we do. We had a call early this week for a pair of four-and-a-half-year-old Siberian Tigers, just one week before euthanasia. My guess would be that they didn't get placed. Right now the Michigan Humane Society wants to send us four caymans, five alligators and two anacondas or they'll be euthanized.

"Unfortunately, we can respond to only about 1 percent of the rescue calls we get. Our big cats and primates have been mostly pets. Reptiles tend to get confiscated out of drug deals. People who deal in drugs are drawn to reptiles. Imagine that."

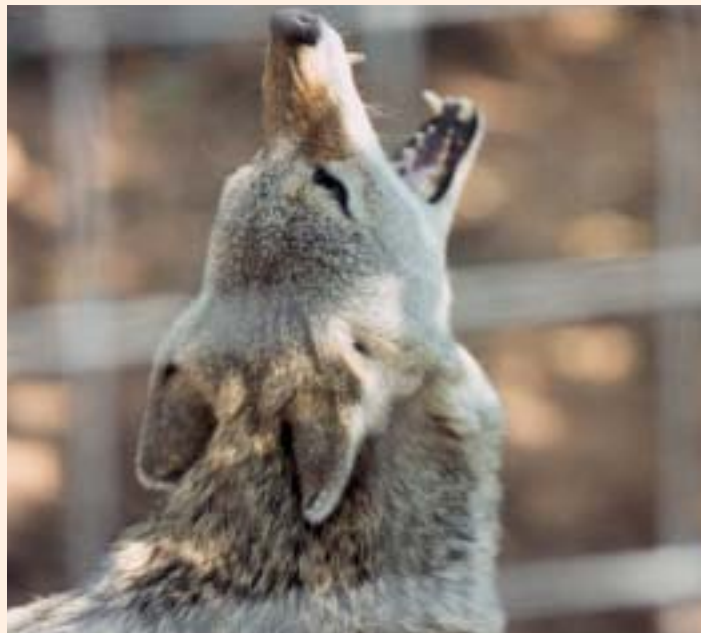
Schmid says she receives up to 20 calls a day from people nationwide trying to place animals and takes in as many as the zoo can support. Defining what Little River Zoo does is not really complicated, even though defining what it is may be.

"My understanding is that a traditional zoo sees animals as inventory while a sanctuary rescues and maintains animals in an environment away from humans," says Karen Holp, Little River Zoo board member and general manager of Norman's KGOU-KROU radio. "Janet believes that when animals have known only captivity, it may not be best to relocate them in a wild environment. Her goal is to make the animal comfortable and happy while allowing it to help in educating people about all our roles on the planet. In a way, Janet facilitates the animal's serving a larger purpose while living in safety and comfort in a situation as like its natural habitat as possible."

At Little River Zoo, guides always lead visitors through the compound. These young men and women—primarily working toward degrees in wildlife management, veterinary medicine or some

other animal-related career—gently discourage the idea of wild animals as pets. Each of the animals has a story, and each of the stories has a moral.

Small, big-eared foxes show that even the tiny can prosper if they use what they have wisely. A blind kangaroo proves that disabilities need not strip life of pleasure. Monkeys with lab numbers tattooed on their chests suggest that even the worst conditions cannot destroy a spirit. Coyotes that howl along with human visitors indicate that belonging to



Zoo visitors howl at Wally, the coyote, and he howls back. Until coming to Little River, he had spent his entire life in an 8-by-10 cage at a research facility that subsequently closed. A group of first graders "adopted" him, collecting pennies for his habitat enclosure.

a good group can help one get through life's dangers and difficulties.

William Mahoney, an OU zoology major who has worked at the zoo for two years, guides tours ranging from small families to groups of 20 to 30 school children through the zoo.

"When young people hear that our cougars are former pets, they get excited," he says. "I tell them that this guy weighs about 110 pounds, while their house cat may weigh 10. 'If you can't get the house cat off the kitchen counter,' I ask them, 'how are you going to get this guy to do

what you want? It isn't about being the coolest guy in school because you've got the biggest cat.'"

Mahoney, like the more than 20 paid workers and the six or so volunteers at the zoo, completed about two weeks of intense pre-employment training in addition to pretty constant on-the-job education. He understands Schmid's philosophy, which he explains to all visitors along with the traditional "hunting-strategies-of-the-nocturnal-animal" information.

The zoo's educational philosophy attracted Dan O'Halloran, a teacher at Moore's Central Junior High. He became a volunteer at the zoo when he discovered it was an ideal outdoor classroom.

"Janet talks about biodiversity and the need to preserve and protect the Earth," he says. "She helps my students understand where these animals came from and why they are where they are now. She wants the students to know the animals' names so they can form some kind of relationships. She wants them to feel as they intellectually understand."

Schmid's educational mission is clear. In addition to providing many teachable moments during tours, she oversees the "You Can Make a Difference" program in schools and on-site to teach environmental responsibility.

The Junior Volunteer Zookeeper Program brings children to the zoo monthly to interact with the animals and learn about what Schmid calls "a variety of humane and environmental education topics." Each year in conjunction with Earth Day, the zoo sponsors the Kids for Kindness Festival. Children graduate as Official Animal Ambassadors for the Planet Earth.

Surveying what she has built, Schmid sees what will be as clearly as what is.

"There aren't many like us," she says. "I don't know of anyone else who has



Fennec foxes are the smallest of their breed, but they are the fastest diggers in the world, requiring enclosures with deeply buried fencing. “You may be little,” tour guides tell young Little River Zoo visitors, “but you can still be the best at something.”

turtle left by the side of the road may seem small, but philosophically, it is very big.

“We’re the only living creature that can decide it’s going to care about something outside itself and take the trouble to save this life,” she explains. “That’s what really separates us from the rest of these animals. Some people call that part of us one thing; some call it something else. I don’t care what you call it. It’s a quality inside each of us that is central to the destiny of this planet and all the life on it. We must nurture it.”

The goal of nurturing that quality in children explains the zoo’s many formal educational programs. Teaching older dogs new tricks is a little more difficult. Adults have found the zoo an ideal location for drive-by dumpings of domestic animals as well as a place to off-load their exotic animals. Schmid tries to do her best for all, cute or ugly, mean or nice, plain or fancy.

“We give the domestic animals their shots and put them in a cage with a sign saying ‘I was dumped at the gate; would you take me home?’” she says. “A woman called recently who had just found out from her ex-husband that he had not, as he had told her, killed her cat. He actually had dumped it here. It was massive and declawed and had never been outside. We had found a home for it. When her former husband told her the truth, she called to discover its fate. She was so happy when I said it went to a good home.

“Another woman came out of a tour crowd bawling because she was meeting an animal who had helped her live her life. We had just explained that these monkeys had come out of an anti-depressant research lab. I have lots of stories.”

She does, indeed, and perhaps the most moving one of all is about the Shawnee girl who became the Norman woman who fell in love with a Moonshadow.



Janet Schmid has big dreams for expansion of the Little River Zoo—a wetlands biological field station, more habitats for the animals and comprehensive education programs in natural-world classrooms.

kept doing this even if they started. It’s very difficult. It might be insane. Our education programs have quintupled over last year. Our walk-in business doubled this spring. We’re open year round, seven days a week.

“We want to build wetlands, and we want to have various habitats, and we want education on every level and from every aspect we can think of. We are finishing building the OSU Veterinary Education Center, a clinic that will open

soon. We’re working on wetlands that will be a biological field station someday for in situ research. We would love to have a school that teaches all the normal curriculum through the natural world so that there’s an understanding that what you’re learning applies. The zoo and its setting are the best classrooms imaginable.”

Just as Schmid is an oxymoronic carnivore bunny-hugger, she is also a practical idealist. In her educational programs, she teaches children that the act of saving a