# EMPATHY MATTERS

## ACE FOR WILDLIFE® NETWORK

*OCTOBER 2026*



Greetings from Portland!

Today, we're writing to you from Portland, Oregon, where the Association of Zoos and Aquariums Annual Conference is being held this year. We couldn't be more excited to share that the Network has received a Significant Achievement for this year's AZA Education Award! We see this award as a reflection of the countless hours that so many of you have put into this Network. We couldn't be here without you, and we want to say a HUGE thank you. We're looking forward to sharing more about all the ways empathy has been showing up throughout the event. But for now, happy Spooky Season to all who celebrate! Yes, October is a wonderful excuse to show off adorable animal and pumpkin photo collaborations, but it also brings creative events, themed programming, and plenty of opportunities to get into the spirit of the season. We can't wait to see what fun things you're all up to this fall!

**ANNOUNCEMENTS:**

**2027 Empathy Summit registration is now live!** You can register for the event or learn more on here.

**Help us Determine our Most Valuable Resource:** A few months ago, we asked the Network to nominate resources that they have found to be the most impactful. Nominations are in and we want you to help select our most valuable resource by voting here before October 16th. Winners will be announced at our Fall Network Meeting.

**Resource feature Literature review:** We are happy to share the newest practitioner's guide on understanding the relationship between empathy for wildlife and empathy for people. The TLDR is: Empathy for animals and empathy for people appear to be related but distinct. People who score higher on one tend to score higher on the other. And what is great to learn: Building empathy for wildlife and building empathy for people are not in competition for a fixed pool of concern; the research suggests mutual reinforcement rather than trade-off. Check it out here!

### Upcoming Events

We have lots of events coming up this month. To learn more about the following events, you can **learn more and register here.**

**October 5 @ 11:00 am - 12:00 pm** | Empathy Champions Share-Out: Working with High Impact Institutions

**October 7 @ 12:30 pm – 1:45 pm** | Empathy Champions Share-Out: Bringing Empathy for Wildlife Concepts to Outdoor Education Professionals

**October 8 @ 10:30 am - 11:30 am** | Coffee chat (2/3): Applying an Empathy Lens to Conversations about Human Wildlife Conflict

**October 12 @ 1:00 pm - 2:00 pm** | Learning Group: Practices for Supporting Neurodiverse Staff

**October 13 @ 12:00 pm - 1:00 pm** | Learning Group: A Focus on Empathy Framing

**October 19 @ 12:00 pm - 1:30 pm** | ACE for Wildlife Network Onboarding: Fall Session

**October 22 @ 10:30 am - 12:30 pm** | ACE for Wildlife Network Fall Meeting

**October 29 @ 10:30 am - 11:45 am** | Empathy Champions Share-Out: Encouraging State Agencies to Utilize Effective Empathy Practices

# In with the Spiders, Out with the Fear

*Written by Marta Burnet*

On a recent visit to England, I couldn't pass up the chance to visit the Zoological Society of London or "Zed-S-L" as it is more casually known. They recently celebrated their 200th anniversary and have a long history of research, so I was pleasantly surprised to see how advanced their use of animal names/preferences as well as the comparison of animal behaviors and characteristics to humans (aka critical anthropomorphism) were. The arachnid section of their Tiny Giants Hall, called "In With the Spiders," was particularly innovative. In addition to highlighting all the ways spiders are "good for you" and having a bathtub habitat to explain why spiders sometimes end up in your sink or tub, they had three elements that really stood out.




For those brave enough, they had a walk-through area where you can share space with and observe orb-weavers without glass to get in the way. An interpreter staffed the area to answer questions and share insights. Ten years ago, I don't think I could have walked through this habitat, but I am proud to say that learning from all the bug lovers in this Network has changed my mind about insects and spiders. I didn't hesitate to go through it. Not that I am ready to staff that area for hours on end, but it is proof positive that empathy work can change our perceptions of "scary" animals.

They also had "The Incredible Talking Spider" habitat narrating the "perspective" of a Mexican, Red-Kneed spider. Comments written by Tom Sears and recorded by comedian and ZSL friend Stewart Lee pointed out all the ways spiders are villainized in society, when humans are the harmful ones. He points out that humans call spiders hurtful names and kill them in all sorts of vicious ways. "Spiders are good for you! You would be knee deep in flies without us." It is a humorous way to encourage guests to take the perspective of spiders and ends with an encouragement to "catch and release" spiders we may come across.

Finally, they had a signage about arachnophobia and how to get over it through their Friendly Spider Program. Offered once a month, this session is led by a hypnotherapist and spider expert zookeeper and provides a combination of cognitive behavioral therapy, hypnotherapy, and controlled exposure to spiders. According to the website information, the 5-hour program has a 98% success rate! Too bad it is sold out through 2026 – I would love to have experienced the workshop first-hand. If you happen to be visiting London, I highly recommend a visit to the zoo!

# Honoring Animals Through Ofrendas: A Día de los Muertos Tradition at Zoos

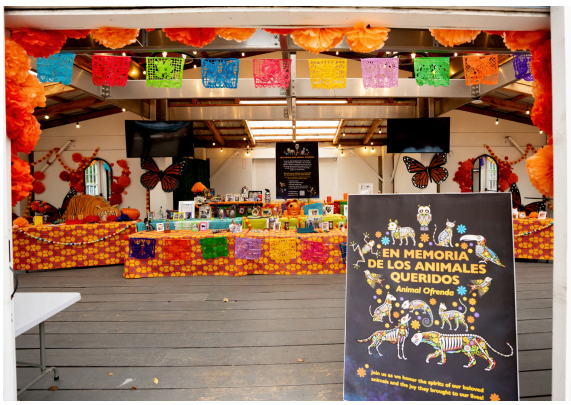
Our Network has always been a space for learning from one another about how to honor the lives of animals who have passed, while giving the people who have cared for them room to reflect. One tradition we've noticed popping up at zoos across the country is the animal ofrenda, and in the spirit of fall, we wanted to share a few examples as inspiration, whether you're looking to start your own or simply visit one in person.

An ofrenda is a decorated altar built to welcome and honor the spirits of loved ones who have passed. Rooted in pre-Hispanic traditions and blended with Catholic influences like All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day, ofrendas are typically assembled by October 31 and taken down after November 2. There can often be regional differences in how people observe this tradition. Oaxaca favors colorful alebrijes (intricate paper mache sculptures often in bright, bold patterns), Michoacán celebrates with sugar skulls and marigold petals, and coastal Veracruz often incorporates shells and other sea life into their ofrendas.

Zoos have found their own meaningful way to celebrate this tradition, creating ofrendas that honor not just human loved ones, but the animals, pets, and zoo residents who've touched our lives. Here's how a few institutions are bringing this tradition to life this year:

**Woodland Park Zoo** will be hosting their third animal ofrenda this year and will be inviting staff and community to submit photos of beloved pets and zoo animals for their animal ofrenda. This honors the bond between people and animals and celebrate the creatures who've inspired conservation and sparked joy. The display opens at Briar Oak on October 22 and remains up through November 1. This year, they will also offer a digital ofrenda so photos submitted online can be featured on screen in the building.






*Woodland Park Zoo's animal ofrenda.*

**Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium** partnered with Tacoma Public School's Science and Math Institute to create a public ofrenda honoring both wild and domestic animals. Visitors are invited to bring a photo of a cherished pet, favorite zoo resident, or inspiring wild creature. They can then spend time reading stories and reflecting at the altar.

**Louisville Zoo** hosts its ofrenda on November 1 and 2, free with admission or membership, honoring pets and zoo animals that brought joy and touched the hearts of staff and guests. They put an emphasis on marigolds and monarch butterflies, which is a fitting addition as the holiday coincides with monarchs' migration to their overwintering grounds in Michoacán.

**North Carolina Zoo** encourages guests to bring 4" x 6" photo(s) of a pet that has passed away to the Zoo, where people can decorate colorful frames provided by the zoo and leave their photo on the Ofrenda altar. For those unable to print a photo, the zoo offers a variety of species of pet printouts that you can decorate to look like a previous pet and place on the altar.

If your organization is also hosting an ofrenda or are looking for more ways to honor animals this season, we'd love to hear about it on our current discussion post on "honoring past animals." We can't wait to cherish the creatures who have touched our lives 💗

**Produced by Woodland Park Zoo, backbone support organization of the Network | empathy@zoo.org | www.zoo.org**

# EMPATHY MATTERS

## ACE FOR WILDLIFE® NETWORK

*SEPTEMBER 2026*



Hello everyone,

Wow…that was fast! Summer is (almost) officially over. We know it takes a village to get through this season, so big congratulations to you all. We're always a big fan of September because that means it's time for the Association of Zoos & Aquariums' annual conference. If you are headed to the conference and want to connect with us, we've got a few opportunities for you:

- **Come stop by the ACE for Wildlife Network booth during the exhibitor hours:** We have several representatives from our Network who will be sharing our work with exhibitor attendees, and we'd love to see you there. You can find us at booth #317.
- **September 27 @ 1 pm - 2:30 pm: ACE for Wildlife Network Business Session:** Join us for our pre-conference session that will showcase interactive opportunities for attendees to learn about what fostering empathy for wildlife can look like in daily practice.
- **September 28 @ 12 pm:** Join us at Cartside Food Courts for a casual no-host lunch with other friends of the Network.
- **Contact List:** Add your contact information here if you'd like to join our group to connect with people in the Network and get reminders for our group activities.
- **September 28 @ 6 pm:** We'll have a group meeting at the Museum of Science and Industry before heading into the Icebreaker. If you're interested in joining, please join the group chat for more information.
- Additionally, don't miss these empathy-related panels and posters during your time at the conference.

Here's what else we have going on in the Network:

**Empathy trainer application:** Are you passionate about empathy, conservation, and helping others learn? Apply to become one of the first Empathy 101 Workshop Trainers and play a key role in delivering a new training program designed to help professionals learn how to inspire empathy for wildlife and conservation action in our audiences. Learn more and apply through the website. Applications close **October 16, 2026**.

**Empathy photo competition:** Last chance to submit your photos to our empathy photo competition! We are accepting submissions through September 15th. Learn more and submit your photos here.

**Partner application deadline approaching:** Applications are now open for US-based, AZA-accredited organizations that are interested in joining the Network (apply by September 30th). If this is something your organization is interested in, we encourage you to learn more here and reach out to empathy@zoo.org with any questions.

## Upcoming Events

We have lots of events coming up this month. To learn more about the following events, you can **learn more and register here.**

**September 9 @ 10:30 am - 11:30 am | ZANE Workshop: Neurodiversity in Zoos & Aquariums**

**October 5 @ 11:00 am - 12:00 pm | Empathy Champions Share-Out: Working with High Impact Institutions**

**October 7 @ 12:30 pm – 1:45pm | Empathy Champions Share-Out: Bringing Empathy for Wildlife Concepts to Outdoor Education Professionals**



***"Empathy is an emotional state that relies on the ability to engage in one or more of the following: perception, understanding, feeling, and/or action in response to the experiences or perspectives of another living being."***

As of August 2026, we formally updated our definition of empathy to the one used in Whitley et al., 2026 (above), an open access literature review published as a part of the Empathy Measurement in Zoo and Aquarium Audiences Project (EMZAAP). This definition was first shared with the ACE for Wildlife Network during Day 3 of the 2026 Virtual Empathy Summit. This change ensures that as a Network, we are using and promoting definitions that accurately encompass the evolving scope of our work. This definition reflects new learnings in empathy and conservation psychology research, emphasizes that empathy can be felt for beings beyond animals, and is more conducive to research and evaluation.

The Steering Committee felt it was important that changes in the Network's practice at this level be decided by the Network. Following multiple discussions with the committee about who is responsible for (and how to go about) updating terminology like a Network definition of empathy, they decided to poll all currently serving committee representatives to act as a litmus test for broader Network sentiment regarding the Young et al., 2018 and the Whitley et al., 2026 definitions. The majority of respondents preferred the newer definition, with many who preferred the original agreeing that components of the newer definition, particularly "all living beings," better reflected the scope of the Network's broader efforts. In follow-up discussions, the committee decided that moving forward any Network-created or promoted materials will utilize Whitley et al.'s definition, while individuals and organizations are welcome to continue using Young et al.'s (2018) definition if they choose.

If you have any questions please send them to empathy@zoo.org.

# Keeper Feature



*Photo Credit: Heidi Beal, Lake Superior Zoo*



After a long summer of peak attendance and non-stop engagement with our guests, keepers are on our minds, and we are feeling extra grateful for them! In case you've missed it, the Network has developed a couple of resources designed specifically for keepers that we wanted to share this month.

**Resource I: Keeper Resource Video.** This video was developed to demonstrate how a keeper at Woodland Park Zoo approaches using empathy practices during an informal guest encounter in front of a hooded vulture habitat. The tools used in this video aim to inspire guests to act in more informed and caring ways towards animals whether at our facilities or in nature. While this video takes place in a zoo setting, its lessons can apply across many places where animal care and conservation professionals engage the public. For organizations who are interested in creating a similar "keeper resource" video, the link also includes a document that provides practical guidance and elements to consider when developing a similar video. If you do so, we would love to see how they turn out!

**Resource II: Empathy Infographic**. This resource was created by closely working with animal care staff from across the Network and communications experts at Team Soapbox to create an empathy infographic designed by animal care staff, for animal care staff. This infographic contains a quick, easy to follow explanation based on a real-life example of how and why effective empathy practices can work to make information "sticky" with guests.

**Resource III: Learning Group - Empathy in Animal Ambassador Programs**. Hear from zookeepers and educators from three different Network Partners (Lake Superior Zoo, Racine Zoo, and ZooMontana) as they share how to incorporate empathy practices into their animal ambassador programs, outreach opportunities, and keeper talks.

**Resource IV: Grant Toolkits – Animal Ambassador and Husbandry Projects**. Our Advancing Empathy Grant Program funds projects that help organizations plan, build, and expand practices that create lasting impacts on empathy-based programming. To make the grant-funded resources developed by all projects more accessible, we have created toolkits organized by different themes. Within this resource, we recommend viewing the animal ambassador and husbandry toolkits for keeper-related resources.

The Animal Ambassador toolkit primarily focuses on grants primarily focuses on grants that incorporate animal choice and control presentation techniques into educational programs to foster empathy and improve perceptions of animal wellbeing.

The Husbandry toolkit showcases projects that integrate animal enrichment, wellbeing-focused design and animal husbandry with empathy-driven visitor engagement. Together, these projects demonstrate how animal care practices and routines, habitat enhancements, and staff training can be leveraged to meaningfully deepen guests' understanding of and connection to wildlife.

As always, if you have any resources that you want to share with our Network, you can **submit them here** or reach out to **empathy@zoo.org**.

# EMPATHY MATTERS

## ACE FOR WILDLIFE® NETWORK

*AUGUST 2026*



Greetings, everyone!

We're well into summer, and we hope you're all feeling energized as we approach the finish line to another busy season of camps, events, and summer programs. Here in Seattle, we've gotten a little extra boost from our new hometown hero, Jimothy, the raccoon who has now become a nationwide legend. He's been a fun reminder that animals have a unique ability to bring people joy and connection in the middle of busy lives. Something we already know well in this Network!

If you're new to Team Jimothy, you should definitely check him out here. And while we're at it, we've also got plenty happening across the ACE for Wildlife Network to share with you this month.

**ANNOUNCEMENTS:**

**Photo competition reminder:** Our third empathy photo competition launched last month, and we are accepting submissions through September 15th. Learn more and submit your photos here.

**Podcast interest survey:** We are creating a podcast for the Network that shares the stories of the people and projects at the heart of our mission! Please fill out this quick survey to share some ideas on how we can build a successful podcast.

**Last chance to apply to be in our second cohort of Empathy Champions:** We are looking for 10 active Network participants to join this professional development opportunity which you can learn more about here. Applications close August 7th.

**Help us nominate our Most Valuable Resource:** We are still looking for "most valuable resource" nominations. If there is a resource that stands out for you, please take a few minutes to fill out this nomination form by the end of this month.

**Resource Feature: Empathy and Storytelling Toolkit**

Across the Network, we are actively exploring not just how to tell stories, but why storytelling matters in conservation work. This toolkit is designed to support that exploration. It offers a shared foundation, practical framing guidance, and real-world examples from across the Network to help organizations tell stories that are ethical, engaging, and effective.

**We have several events on the horizon!** Make sure to check them out and register on our events page.

# Small Animal, Huge Impact: The Case for Rats

We've covered plenty of non-charismatic species in this newsletter, but this might be the final boss: **rats**. As a gardener, I've spent years protecting my veggies from them, and I'll be the first to admit I have my own reservations. But after talking with Jessica Hartmann, Director of Education at Staten Island Zoo, I may be coming around, and she's doing the same for guests at her zoo.

Jessica grew up owning rats and has been a longtime fan of them since she was young. So when she discovered APOPO, an organization that trains "HeroRATs" to detect landmines and diseases like tuberculosis, she knew she'd found the story she needed to tell. Seven years ago, she made the case to add Norway rats to the zoo's ambassador animal lineup. Once approved, she had the perfect combination to match the faces to the stories and finally change the script on rats.

Telling this story has largely taken place in school programs that the zoo is involved with, and it can be an uphill battle, especially since New Yorkers aren't exactly rat enthusiasts to begin with. To counter this, Jessica, along with the Zoo's educators and docents, start small by introducing guests to the Zoo's ambassador rats. These little creatures with big personalities have been known to ride her shoulder and, occasionally, meticulously clean their own faces with a cuteness that's hard to resist.





*Rats Remy and Emilie eating snacks & another rat exploring on Jessica's arm.*

Then, they weave in the story of HeroRATs to start winning over the skeptics. Guests are often shocked to learn that clearing a minefield the size of a tennis court can take a human two weeks, but a rat does it in 30 minutes. Or there's the story of screening sputum samples for tuberculosis: a lab technician might need four days, but a trained rat can check 100 samples in 20 minutes with greater accuracy than humans, a major boost for early detection of one of the world's deadliest diseases. Add search-and-rescue work and wildlife trafficking detection, and suddenly there's a room full of (rat)ical converts!

Several years in, surveys show the programming is shifting attitudes and building genuine empathy, not just tolerance. One particular comment stated, "We all walked away with a different appreciation of rats and their capabilities." The zoo now houses two Gambian pouch rats, Remy and Emillie, the same species APOPO trains, deepening the connection for guests.

When asked what other zoos could do to participate in this kind of programming, Jessica suggested reaching out to APOPO directly, as the partnership is more accessible than people assume. The organization also shares helpful husbandry and training methods. Beyond that, it comes down to finding that one compelling story and leaning into a little critical anthropomorphism to build connections with guests.

I also couldn't miss the opportunity to ask Jessica her favorite thing about rats, to which she shared their personalities, their eagerness to learn, and their unmatched ability to change minds. Feeling inspired? Jessica welcomes emails at jhartmann@statenislandzoo.org.

*Written by Sarah Panciroli*

# Banana Slug Summer: How Northwest Trek Makes Banana Slugs the Stars of Summer

Sometimes some of our most important species in the Pacific Northwest don't get nearly enough attention, but Northwest Trek Wildlife Park in Eatonville, Washington is turning that around with a slime-forward celebration! Slug Fest, the park's beloved annual event, has been teaching visitors about banana slugs since 1983 and has since become a community gem and a way to give these underappreciated creatures the spotlight they deserve.

So what is Slug Fest all about? The event has evolved a lot over four decades, but slug races have always been a staple. In its earliest years, guests would find their own slug to compete in the race. That tradition lives on today through human slug races, where guests channel their inner mollusk by dressing up as slugs, tentacles and all, sliding their way to the finish line in a slimy slip-n-slide showdown. Talk about perspective-taking!

But Slug Fest is about more than just fun and games. Through Keeper Chats, hands-on activities, and park-wide signage, visitors learn about banana slugs' vital role as forest decomposers, how they navigate the world through senses and slime, and how humans can coexist with them, including natural ways to deter slugs from gardens without causing them harm. As Naturalist Nicole Hennigan explains, the event invites guests to see the world from a slug's point of view: "We promote empathy for banana slugs by giving guests the opportunity to take the perspective of slugs and see how even slugs have agency in their choices for survival."



*Children dressed up as banana slugs during Slug Fest!*

This year's event drew a strong crowd despite chilly, wet weather (a slug's ideal temp, if not ours!) and got an extra boost from a local TV appearance on Tacoma's Cityline program. Slug Fest is also an all-hands-on-deck effort, bringing together staff and volunteers from Animal Care, Nature Engagement, Facilities, and beyond.

When asked what other zoos and aquariums could learn from the event, Nicole summed it up best: "Through empathy, any animal can be the star of the weekend... It is a perfect blend of creativity and education and allows each department to do what is in their capacity to slime — I mean shine."

Want to learn more or bring a similar event to your organization? Contact Nicole Hennigan at Northwest Trek: **Nicole.hennigan@nwtrek.org** or visit **nwtrek.org/event/slug-fest**.

# EMPATHY MATTERS

## ACE FOR WILDLIFE® NETWORK

*JULY 2026*



Hello everyone!

Hoping everyone is soaking up the season! Summer is in full swing filled with camps, special programs, and exciting guest connections. Here's what's happening across the Network:

**ANNOUNCEMENTS:**

**Help us nominate our Most Valuable Resource:** Across the Network, we have had incredible contributions to our resource library, and we want your help recognizing a "most valuable resource." If there is a resource that stands out for you, please take a few minutes to fill out this nomination form.

**Empathy Photo Contest:** Our 2026 Empathy Photo Contest is live, and we have some exciting updates to the competition! Open to anyone in our Network, this contest is an opportunity to showcase your unique perspective on empathy between animals and people. You can learn about the details of this contest here and help us spread the word by sending this flyer to your contacts. Submit your photos now through September 15th.

**Reminder:** Apply to be in our second cohort of Empathy Champions: Empathy Champions design and lead outreach projects that engage new partners and audiences in empathy for wildlife. We are looking for 10 active Network participants to join this professional development opportunity which you can learn more about here or register for our office hours on July 20th, 1pm PST.

**Extension for our Summit proposal review WG – Due July 17th:** We are still seeking around 3 individuals to review and select presentation proposals for the Empathy Summit. These representatives' registration fees for the Empathy Summit will be waived. Our call for proposals is also open! Visit our Summit information page for more details.

**AI Parameters:** You've probably been hearing about AI everywhere, and it's been on our minds too. Thanks to the Steering Committee, we've developed guidelines and parameters for AI usage within the Network, now available in our resource library. If you contribute resources or participate in other Network activities, please take a moment to familiarize yourself with the document.

**Resource Feature: Empathy Toward Animals | Documenting Measurement Instruments Used in Research and Practice**

We have another paper for you all developed by some of our Network Superstars! This paper examines the measurement landscape of empathy toward animals by identifying and describing tools used in both academic research and conservation practice.

**Check out our Q2 Committee updates here.**

# Forests for All: Woodland Park Zoo Debuts their Brand-New Forest Trailhead Building

This May, Woodland Park Zoo (located in Seattle, WA) welcomed visitors into one of its most ambitious projects yet: Forest Trailhead, a building dedicated entirely to the global movement for forest conservation. As part of the zoo's broader Forests for All campaign, this new building is a space where naturalistic habitats meet modern, sustainable architecture, and where each animal habitat and interpretive display reinforces the importance of protecting forests globally, and in our own backyard.

The journey begins high above the ground on a sky-high canopy trail, where wooden boardwalks wind through the treetops alongside Matschie's tree kangaroos from Papua New Guinea and red pandas from the Eastern Himalayas. Visitors have been quick to notice the almost "animal playground" feel, as tunnels to climb through and no shortage of perches naturally invite guests to take the perspective of what it might be like to live amongst the trees. Descending to mid-level, visitors meet New Zealand's kea, one of the most clever and investigative alpine parrots in the world. The lower inside level opens into a gallery of African, Asian, and Australasian reptiles, amphibians, and fish, representing around 20 colorful species that offer an up-close, observational look at even more ambassadors of the forest.
The building itself is a exemplifies the zoo's conservation values. Forest Trailhead is targeting LEED Gold certification and incorporates bird-safe windows, solar panels, on-site stormwater management, and biophilic design principles throughout. Indigenous art and interpretation are also woven into the experience, honoring communities actively leading conservation efforts including the Lummi Nation and Papua New Guinea's Yopno-Uruwa-Som communities, whose cultural exchange of ancestral knowledge, stories, songs, and strength in sovereignty is a living part of the exhibit.

What truly sets Forest Trailhead apart is its signage approach, thoughtfully designed to build genuine empathy. Displays highlight individual animals by name, sharing their personalities and the specific care they receive from routine health check-ups to physical therapy. "Who Do You Relate To?" signs invite guests to find themselves in creatures ranging from tiny frogs to red pandas. A Listen to the Forest installation also allows visitors to tune into distinct soundscapes from Washington forests, fostering a deeper connection to local green spaces. Conservation action signage makes tangible asks, particularly around paper use while a Tree Equity display connects urban canopy coverage to community health and climate resilience. Other panels explore what it means to honor native treaties, spotlight the zoo's conservation partnerships in Nepal and Papua New Guinea, and ask visitors directly: what role can we each play in upholding the commitments we've made to the land and to one another?

This is a building that not only beautifully connects visitors to wildlife, but asks us to act on behalf of it, challenging every visitor to find their place in the story of the world's forests.



*Up close with Rocket, the male Tree Kangaroo at Forest Trailhead.*



*On the new skybridge with animal overpass.*

# The Magic of Natural Behavior: Dakota Zoo's Animal Program Creating Empathy for Prairie Animals

Imagine you're at an animal program featuring prairie dogs, looking at a table with a replica of their habitat. You think it's a simple model, but suddenly, a prairie dog peeks their head out of a burrow before ducking back inside. Shortly after, a ferret emerges from a neighboring hole, as if by magic, and you find yourself wondering: Where did those come from? This simple habitat model has become a story about two species important to North Dakota that helps guests understand a different side of wildlife through themes of disappearance, survival, and connection.



*Up close with a black-footed ferret.*

The black-footed ferret is one of North Dakota's most significant yet overlooked wildlife conservation stories. This species once had a familiar presence on the state's grasslands, but ferret populations began to collapse as prairie dogs were widely eliminated to make way for ranching and agriculture. Long viewed as a nuisance for the damage they cause to ranch lands, prairie dogs became the target of widespread removal efforts. Since prairie dogs make up the vast majority of a ferret's diet, the ripple effect has been profound and resulted in the absence of documented black-footed ferret presence in North Dakota today.

The education team at Dakota Zoo wanted to bring this story to life in a memorable way by giving two prairie dog ambassadors and three domestic ferret ambassadors their chance in the spotlight. Using impressive in-house design, the team built a life-sized, realistic prairie dog mound that mounts directly to a table, complete with hidden entry and exit points sized for both species. These openings connect to the animals' holding spaces beneath the table, cleverly concealed by a tablecloth. The result is an interactive exhibit that lets guests witness natural behaviors up close, which would otherwise be missed by most people who only get a glimpse of life out on the open prairie.

For many North Dakotans, prairie dogs have long been associated with pest control concerns and ranching headaches. Programs like this one are vital precisely because they offer guests the chance to simply watch one, giving them the chance to change their minds about these creatures. When these animals emerge and showcase their natural behaviors, an immediate connection forms, translating directly into deeper learning and leaving guests with a genuine understanding of just how intertwined the lives of prairie dogs and black-footed ferrets truly are.

Based on early success, the team is already looking ahead and considering training the prairie dogs to "bark" on cue and teaching the ferrets to stand tall on the mound which would bring even more authentic prairie flair to an already compelling program. And for any organization inspired to try something similar, the Dakota Zoo team suggests being open-minded about which animals you feature. Don't assume an animal isn't trainable, and don't underestimate their ability to generate real awe and wonder in guests.

Curious to learn more about this program? Reach out to the education team at **educate@dakotazoo.org!**

**Produced by Woodland Park Zoo, backbone support organization of the Network | empathy@zoo.org | www.zoo.org**

# EMPATHY MATTERS

## ACE FOR WILDLIFE® NETWORK

*MAY 2026*



Hello everyone,

Wishing you a happy May – we are looking forward to diving into announcements and updates with you all this month

# Curriculum Development Initiative

We are excited to announce that we have selected Mandy Kirchgessner, Ed.D, Executive Director of Nonprofit GrowthGen (NPGG), and Kyrie Kellett, Founding Principal of Mason Bee Interpretive Planning, to partner with on the curriculum development project we have underway.

Mandy began her career at the Phoenix Zoo and went on to lead public and youth programs for major museums and aquariums, while also earning a master's and doctorate in educational design focused on conservation education. As a military spouse, she has global experience in curriculum development, evaluation, and capacity-building across institutions such as Shedd Aquarium and Bishop Museum. Since founding NPGG, LLC in 2022, she has supported museums and nonprofits nationwide, guided by a passion for making learning engaging, inclusive, and learner-centered.

Kyrie Kellett will partner with NPGG as a thought partner and support product refinement, bringing deep experience across museums, science centers, arboreta, and parks. Her career includes leading large federally funded, cross-functional projects at the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry (OMSI) and founding Mason Bee Interpretive Planning, where she develops research-grounded visitor experience plans, programs, and grants. She also serves as Lead Trainer for the NAI Interpretive Planning course and recently completed a full curriculum redesign of the course.

As part of this initiative, we would like to create a Curriculum Development Working Group with 4-5 Members and Affiliates. **For more information about getting involved, visit our website. Applications will be due May 8th.** We will share more about what this project will entail in coming weeks. Stay tuned for more details!

**ANNOUNCEMENTS:**

The Communications Committee invites you to share your voice in the ACE for Wildlife Network Newsletter! Learn more about this opportunity here.

**Empathy Photo Contest:** Are you passionate about photography as an art form? Come be a part of our Empathy Photo Contest Working Group! This group will shape the 2026 Network photography contest, review submissions, and help to disseminate contest information. Our first meeting will be in early June, followed by a few meetings from June to October. This working group will dissolve after the contest concludes and requires a minimal time commitment outside of scheduled meetings. Email empathy@zoo.org before May 20th if you are interested in joining this group.

**Resource Feature:** From information-sharing to collaboration: how structured networks support professional practice in zoos and aquariums. This study examined how our Network's structured design and facilitation supported information-sharing and collaboration among participating zoos and aquariums. The results demonstrate that information-sharing served as a critical foundation for collaboration, with participants forming new partnerships and leveraging shared resources.

# Committee Retreat Update

There's a lot happening across the ACE for Wildlife Network, and we're excited to share a snapshot of our ongoing Strategic Planning Process along with a highlight from our recent time together in Minnesota.

Last month, the Steering Committee and committee chairs gathered in person to dive into the Discovery Phase of our strategic planning work. Hosted by Como Park Zoo & Conservatory, the April retreat brought together 20 Network participants for a day of thoughtful discussion, reflection, and collaboration.

This process is being guided by Canopy Strategic Partners, who are helping us build a data-driven roadmap for the Network's future. Since December, their team has conducted interviews, listening sessions and surveys with Network participants to better understand our current landscape and where members hope to see the Network grow. During the retreat, we reviewed early findings and began working through key areas of tension and opportunity.

Two themes rose to the surface. The first: balancing depth of impact with scale of influence. As we seek ways to grow sustainably and strategically, how do we expand our reach while maintaining the meaningful, relationship-driven work that defines the Network? The second: designing a leadership structure that supports growth while preserving the culture that makes this network feel inclusive, collaborative, and grounded.



*Group Photo from the 2026 Committee Retreat*

Committee members explored these questions together, identifying potential pathways forward that will help ensure the Network evolves alongside our community's needs. In the coming weeks, Canopy Strategic Partners will compile a full report to guide next steps. We've already made meaningful progress, and we're looking forward to sharing more soon.

While at Como, we couldn't pass up the opportunity to connect with staff and learn about new empathy-centered initiatives. Please enjoy this excerpt from a standout project that came from Leah Peterson Sisler and the Como CARES Team:

*"Did you know that Gentoo penguins "gift" their partners with the perfect pebble? While this behavior is not observed in African penguins, the Como CARES (Connection, Access, Reach, Engagement, and Storytelling) Team loved the idea of exchanging beautiful rocks to communicate kindness, empathy, and wildlife conservation.*

*Como Park Zoo & Conservatory partnered with MN Kindness Alliance and the Anoka Kindness Rock Garden for a rock painting activity during its "Waddle into Action" AZA SAFE Conservation Weekend for African penguins, powered by Xcel Energy. Participants were invited to paint their own rock—or three— with images to inspire conservation, kindness, community, connection, and empathy for wildlife.*

*Each rock was affixed with a QR code leading to deeper engagement with African penguin conservation through Como's global partner, SANCCOB. Participants were encouraged to leave their perfect Penguin Pebbles around the community for others to discover, enjoy, and learn more about African penguin conservation.*

*Como's penguin rocks have been scanned 180 times in the weeks following "Waddle into Action," according to webpage analytics.*



*Rock Painting from the "Waddle into Action" Project*

*Como Friends Conservation Sponsorship: For every Penguin Pebble painted, Como Friends donated $1.25 to our global conservation partners at the South African Foundation for the Conservation of Coastal Birds (SANCCOB), a non-profit organization dedicated to rescuing, rehabilitating, and conserving seabirds—especially endangered species like the African penguin.*

*Fueled by public participation (800 rocks painted = $1,000 USD / 16 850,00 ZAR donated), Como Friends sponsored all 19 African penguins currently receiving medical care through SANCCOB for rehabilitation and wild release, along with 20 African penguin eggs to be hatched, hand-reared, and released."*

**Upcoming Events**

To learn more and register for each event, please go to our events page **here.**

# EMPATHY MATTERS

## ACE FOR WILDLIFE® NETWORK

*APRIL 2026*



Hi everyone,

We are happy to celebrate the start of Spring with you all. It's a time of growth, renewal, and often, new animal arrivals. At Woodland Park Zoo, we're marking the moment with the arrival of two lion cubs, featured in our headline photo!

**ANNOUNCEMENTS:**

**ACE for Wildlife Network Fall Meeting:** Save the date for our annual fall Network meeting! The fall meeting will be taking place on October 22nd from 10:30 am - 12:30 pm PST. We hope to see you there!

**Want to be Featured in our Newsletter?** If you're working on an empathy related project – the ACE for Wildlife Network community wants to hear about it! You can learn more and submit a feature for a future edition of Empathy Matters through our new newsletter submission platform.

**2026 Conference Scholarships:** Do you have an empathy-related project that you want to share at an upcoming conference? We are currently accepting applications for scholarships for Members and Affiliates to present on an empathy-related project at AZA or other conferences. Please review this discussion post for details and further information.

**Q1 Committee Updates** can be viewed **here**.

**Resource Feature:** Our **empathy primer** tells you all you need to know about the ACE for Wildlife Network, the case for empathy, tools you can use to effectively infuse this work into your organization and examples of projects done by Partners. We've had some exciting updates since we created this resource, so we encourage you to check it out and share it with your colleagues.

**Upcoming Events**

To learn more and register for each event, please go to our events page **here.**

**April 14 @ 10 am - 11:15 am PST | Learning Group: Infusing Empathy in Zoo Summer Camps**

**April 23 @ 10 am - 11:30 am PST | ACE for Wildlife Network Spring Welcome Session**

# A Creative Way to Share the Love for Overlooked Animals

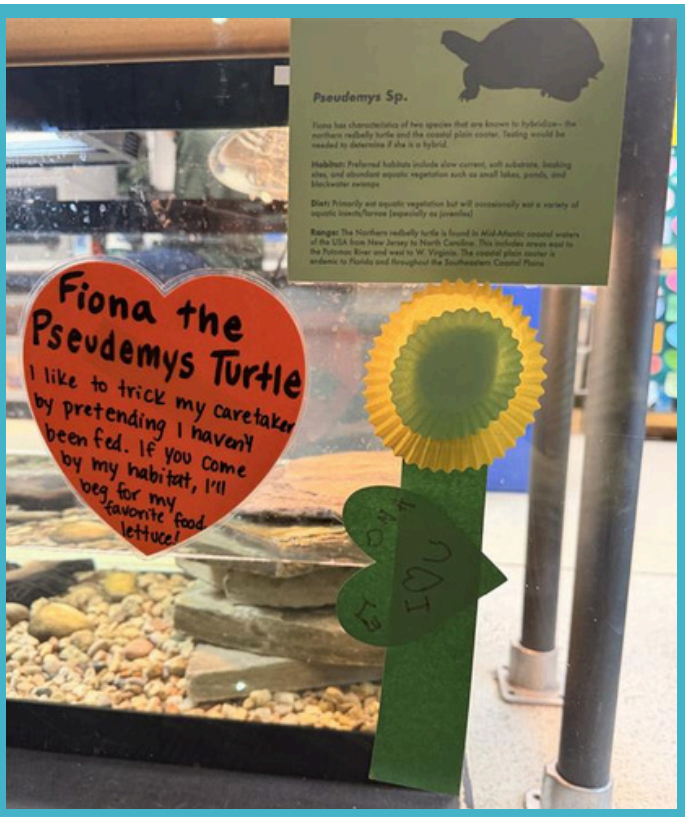
In our Network, we are no stranger to the narrative that mammals sometimes take center stage as guests' favorite animals. But at the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum of the Chicago Academy of Sciences, the stars of the show look a little different. The museum's living collections feature exclusively non mammal creatures, offering a twist on what we often see in zoos and aquariums.

Recently at our virtual Empathy Summit, Jennifer Olson, Director of Guest and Community Engagement, and Elena Webster, Community Programs Specialist, shared how their museum invites visitors to see these animals in a new light by writing them Valentine's Day cards. This activity uses framing to highlight animals as individuals with their own behaviors and life experiences. While Valentine's Day is an ideal time to implement this project, people do not have to wait for a holiday to try something similar, especially considering the appreciation we have for animals every day.

To prepare for the program, the education team worked closely with the museum's biology department to create short "empathy hooks" for each animal in the Mysteries of the Marsh exhibit, ensuring that everything was both engaging and scientifically accurate. Behind the scenes, the team created a shared spreadsheet listing every animal in the exhibit. For each one, they wrote a short empathy hook that highlighted a behavior, personality trait, or life story. These messages were then displayed in the exhibit as heart shaped signs.

Some of these signs shared the stories of animals who now call the museum home, such as Gumbo the Mississippi mud turtle. Gumbo was discovered in a bag of crayfish shipped to a Chicago restaurant. Gumbo was rescued and given a new home at the museum.

Nearby, Gertie the Chicago garter snake's sign shared another story. Because of an injury, she couldn't survive in the wild, but she now lives safely at the museum where she helps visitors learn about a subspecies unique to the Chicago region.



*Valentines for Fiona the Pseudemys Turtle*

After exploring the exhibit and reading the hearts, visitors were invited to create a Valentine for the animal they felt most connected to. At a craft table outside the exhibit, guests made flower shaped cards from cupcake liners and construction paper, wrote a message, and taped their Valentine near the habitat. The messages are often heartfelt, funny, or wonderfully simple. This year, one child wrote to Gertie, "You are my favorite because you are long."

Over the course of the weekend, the exhibit fills with colorful cards during this program. Children sometimes search for animals that have not yet received a Valentine so that no one is left out, even writing messages for feeder fish, insect residents, or biofacts.

While the activity is themed around Valentine's Day, the idea behind it can extend far beyond a single holiday. By highlighting animals as individuals and inviting visitors to express appreciation, simple moments of creativity can open the door to empathy for species that might otherwise go unnoticed.

To learn more about this project, you can watch the project shareout or reach out to Jennifer and Elena at programs@naturemuseum.org for additional information.

# Empathy in Action at the Natural History Museums

As the Advancing Conservation through Empathy for Wildlife Network continues to grow beyond zoos and aquariums, we are always excited to see how other institutions are weaving empathy into their programs and experiences. This month we spoke with Anya Hunter, Senior Manager of Interpretation Education, and Becca Prater, Museum Educator at the Natural History Museums of Los Angeles County, about two creative initiatives that help visitors connect more deeply with the natural world.

Through their participation in the LEGO Playful Learning Museum Network, the museum incorporates learning-through-play experiences into festivals and events such as their dinosaur festival and upcoming pollinator celebration.

At these events, children are introduced to a conservation challenge and invited to build imaginative solutions using LEGOs. During the recent Dino Fest, the focus was on empowering people to create solutions to help modern dinosaurs [aka birds] avoid extinction. Urban birds face specific challenges in city environments, including excess artificial light that can disrupt their sleep. Museum Educators first built knowledge and value around the topic using empathy best practices, and invited perspective-taking by asking children to consider what birds experience while living in cities. They drew connections between dinosaurs and modern birds, reminding participants that while dinosaurs disappeared after an asteroid impact, we have the opportunity to protect their living relatives.



*Young learners building environmental solutions using legos*

From there, guests designed their own creative conservation solutions. One young participant even imagined a robot that could absorb excess city light to help birds rest at night. As Becca shared, the “innocent imagination” of children often leads to surprisingly thoughtful ideas! The activity concluded with a pledge station, where individuals commit to small conservation actions like turning off lights at night.

Another program, Collections Revealed, invites guests to meet a researcher and view a typically unseen portion of the museum’s collections. In this moderated program, curators and researchers introduce a specimen or animal, explain how it is cared for, and discuss how it helps scientists understand change and care over time.

In one recent session featuring a live banana slug, Becca began by asking children how they felt about the animal. Some reacted with exaggerated “gross” expressions while others showed excitement.

As the slug’s eye stalks slowly emerged on camera under a scope, the audience naturally quieted down, recognizing that the animal needed a calm environment to feel safe. A beautiful learning moment progressed as observers slowed down, paid closer attention, and began to connect with the slug, with many transforming into slug superfans by the end of the session. Moments like this create opportunities for visitors to practice empathy through observation and perspective-taking.

For the museum educator team, a key lesson is simple: sometimes the most important step is just to try. Sometimes just giving a new idea a chance can be the starting point for incredible programming. If you want to learn more about either of these projects, you can reach out to Anya Hunter at ahunter@nhm.org or 213-763-3213.

# EMPATHY MATTERS

## ACE FOR WILDLIFE® NETWORK

*MARCH 2026*



*(Katie Cotterill) Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium*

Hello everyone,

And just like that, we have another Empathy Summit in the books! As always, it was great to see so many faces from the Network, and we are feeling energized from all the meaningful and thoughtful collaboration. We have so much to look forward to in 2026 and beyond.

**ANNOUNCEMENTS:**

**Partner Application Deadline Approaching**
The deadline for the spring round of Partner applications is March 31st! This round is the last one before the 2027 Empathy Summit where new Partner Organizations would receive travel benefits to facilitate staff attendance at the in-person event. Prospective applicants should review our Network bylaws and expansion plan before applying and can learn more about Partner Organization requirements here. The Membership Committee will be hosting office hours mid-month for those filling out the application. Event details will be shared on the discussion board.

**Empathy Summit Session Recordings** can be found here if you missed the event. There were many great sessions, so do check them out.

**Want to be Featured in our Newsletter?** If you're working on an empathy related project – the ACE for Wildlife Network community wants to hear about it! You can learn more and submit a feature for a future edition of Empathy Matters through our new newsletter submission platform.

**2026 Conference Scholarships:** Do you have an empathy-related project that you want to share at an upcoming conference? We are currently accepting applications for scholarships for Members and Affiliates to present on an empathy-related project at AZA or other conferences. Please review this discussion post for details and further information.

**Photo Competition:** Congratulations to our 2026 Empathy Photo Contest Winners! You can see all our beautiful submissions here.

**Upcoming Events**

To learn more and register for each event, please go to our events page **here.**

**March 11 11:00 am - 12:00 pm PST | Coffee chat: Empathy Test Kitchen**

# Bright Spots of Empathy in the Bronx Zoo's *World of Darkness*

When I think back to my first visits to the zoo, I fondly recall trips to nocturnal houses and the awe I felt as I was transported to a hidden world of animal activity. When the Bronx Zoo's *World of Darkness* reopened in summer 2025 after a 16-year closure, it wasn't just the return of a beloved exhibit; it was also an opportunity to reimagine how people connect with species that are often misunderstood, overlooked, unfamiliar, or even feared.

When it originally opened in 1969, *World of Darkness* was one of the first zoo exhibits to showcase nocturnal animals on a reverse light cycle, allowing visitors to observe night-dwelling creatures at their most active. While fostering empathy was not explicitly defined as a goal of the new exhibit, the objectives of inspiring awe and appreciation for animals were woven throughout the design. Guided by the core idea that all nocturnal animals have fascinating adaptations that help them survive in the dark, the exhibit invites visitors to discover the amazing behaviors, body features, and senses that make each species unique.

Interactive consoles placed directly in front of habitats encourage guests to engage their senses in playful, intuitive ways. Visitors can imagine having long, spindly fingers like an aye-aye by tapping an illustrated log to reveal hidden grubs, simulating how the animal searches for food. Elsewhere, guests learn about vampire bat behavior by pressing a button to reveal how these bats detect blood vessels beneath a cow's skin using heat-sensitive receptors in their noses.



*Example of Bronx Zoo's World of Darkness signage*

These moments of perspective-taking are paired with thoughtfully crafted animal ID labels that go beyond basic facts. For vampire bats, the team intentionally highlighted their social bonds, specifically how individuals will regurgitate blood to feed colony members who haven't eaten. Rather than softening the reality of how vampire bats survive by drinking blood, this approach offers an opportunity for connection through empathy framing—interpreting these animals as individuals who care for each other. This subtle reframing of science-based content has the power to reduce potential feelings of fear or disgust and spark empathy, even for animals with challenging reputations.

The *World of Darkness* exhibit also takes an empathetic approach to managing guest behavior. In addition to directive rules such as "Camera flash must be off. For the best photos, use the long exposure setting," some rules are communicated from the animals' perspective. One entry sign that features an illustration of a douroucouli (also known as a night monkey) at children's height reminds visitors, "Bright light can hurt our eyes! Please don't use your phone flashlight or camera flash." By grounding these messages in both care for animals and a good visitor experience, the exhibit encourages compliance through understanding and compassion rather than enforcement.

Early evaluation results suggest this approach is resonating. Visitors report high satisfaction, strong engagement with interactive elements, and increased learning about adaptations, conservation efforts, and the adverse effects of lights on nocturnal animals. Perhaps most telling: bats emerged as a fan favorite, outshining even traditionally "cute" species. In the dark, curiosity grows, and empathy follows!

# A "Closer Look" at Creating Empathy Through Observation

Sometimes, sparking empathy starts with something as simple as asking, "*Do you want a closer look?*" At the Saint Louis Zoo, a simple yet powerful docent-led bird engagement project is proving that a single pair of binoculars can transform not only how guests see birds, but how they feel about them.

The project was initiated by volunteer docent Joanne Vogelpohl, who regularly interprets at the Zoo's historic Bird House. This habitat showcases a diverse collection of species from rhinoceros hornbills and Victorian pigeons to bleeding-heart doves. Like many of us who have a soft spot for certain animals, Joanne noticed that some of these birds weren't receiving the curiosity or enthusiasm they deserved. Her solution was refreshingly simple: Invite guests to slow down and observe more closely by offering them a pair of binoculars.

By placing binoculars directly into guests' hands, docents create an immediate point of connection. What might otherwise feel like a quiet walkthrough becomes an interactive experience rooted in curiosity, play, and shared discovery. Asking someone if they want to use a pair of binoculars also serves as an easy, non-invasive way to break the ice and begin talking about animals.



*Guest uses binoculars to get a closer look at Saint Louis Zoo's beautiful birds!*

As guests search for various birds, docents guide them using open-ended questions and gentle prompts: *What do you notice? Where do you think this bird lives? How might you get there?* Conservation conversation guides further support these interactions by equipping docents with key biological details and conservation messages to deepen the experience.

The use of this interpretive tool's impact is amplified through its family-centered approach. Parents often step in to help children adjust the binoculars, turning observation into a collaborative experience. In these moments, empathy spreads outward from animal to child and from child to caregiver. Zoo guests also are reminded that birding doesn't require expensive gear or expert knowledge; it can begin right where they are. Many are pleasantly surprised to learn that binoculars can even be borrowed from local libraries.

Beyond the Bird House, this interpretive tool is used in the historic 1904 World's Fair Flight Cage and Cypress Swamp area of the Zoo, where binoculars could help guests locate animals within a larger, more immersive environment. Wherever it appears, the goal remains the same: to help guests slow down, look closer, and recognize animals not as background scenery, but as living beings worthy of care. You can connect with Joanne here if you want to learn more about this project.

# EMPATHY MATTERS

## ACE FOR WILDLIFE® NETWORK

*FEBRUARY 2026*



Hello everyone! Wishing you a happy February, and a shadow-less ground hog! We can't wait to see many of you soon for our Empathy Summit in less than two weeks.

**ANNOUNCEMENTS:**

**2026 Conference Scholarships:** Do you have an empathy-related project that you want to share at an upcoming conference? We are currently accepting applications for scholarships for Members and Affiliates to present on an empathy-related project at AZA or other conferences. Please review this discussion post for details and further information.

**Photo Competition – Help Select our Winners:** Our photo contest committee has made the difficult decision to determine the top finalists from our incredible submissions. Please help us choose our winners here.

**Have you been working on exciting empathy-related projects** that you want to share with the ACE for Wildlife Network? Our 2026 Learning Group Expression of Interest form is now live until February 19th. Before submitting an expression of interest, please review the learning group planning document in full.

**Help Assess Our Network's EcoCulture:** This assessment from our Canopy Strategic Partners will help us assess how energy, collaboration, leadership, and trust exist in the Network, and what conditions will help us thrive in the future. Your responses will add to the data's biodiversity, and we hope that this feedback can help us create a healthier and more resilient Network. **The survey takes about 15 minutes to complete and will remain open through March 2, 2026.*

**Resource Feature: The Interconnections of DEAI Initiatives and Effective Empathy Practices:** This resource, created by the DEAI committee, highlights the relationship between effective empathy practices and DEAI initiatives by showcasing different projects from across the Network.

**Upcoming Events**

To learn more and register for each event, please go to our events page **here.**

**February 10 - 12, 2026** | Virtual Empathy Summit

**February 26 9:30 am - 11 am |** Learning Group: Using empathy to tell better conservation focused stories (Part II)

# Putting the Community in Community Science - ZooMontana's Bumble Bee Surveys

We are deep into winter, but as many of you know, Spring planning comes quickly in the education and conservation world. This season, we're highlighting a warm-weather project from ZooMontana that not only contributed meaningful data to conservation science, but also brought staff together through a shared, hands-on experience. To learn more, we spoke with Abbi Robson, ZooMontana's Conservation Engagement Manager—a role that is brand new to the organization and dedicated solely to conservation.

ZooMontana has prioritized conservation since opening in 1995, but as a smaller AZA-accredited Zoo, limited staff capacity has often made it challenging to fully develop and sustain conservation initiatives. With support from the Advancing Empathy grant program, ZooMontana was able to create this new position, allowing Abbi to focus on engaging staff and the community in conservation efforts while evaluating how empathy-infused messaging shows up in existing programs.

Since starting in June 2025, Abbi has centered much of her work around community science projects, with bumble bee surveys emerging as a standout success. Conducted through Bumble Bee Watch—a continent-wide community science program run by the Xerces Society—the surveys invited ZooMontana staff to step into the role of field researchers. Armed with butterfly nets, coolers (for safely encouraging the bees to fall asleep), and timers, small teams surveyed designated garden areas on Zoo grounds, gently collecting, photographing, and releasing bumble bees while recording detailed data on plant associations, species, and sex.



*ZooMontana community science in action!*



*ZooMontana staff analyzing data from their bumble bee surveys.*



*Up-close bumble bee photo from survey.*

Luckily, ZooMontana is home to numerous pollinator gardens which proved to be ideal survey locations. Over the course of the summer, staff conducted weekly surveys contributing verified data to a larger effort to better understand bumble bee distributions across North America. One particularly exciting outcome was the confirmation of two-spotted bumble bees near the western edge of their known range, helping fill an important data gap in a region where insect research is often limited.

Beyond the scientific impact, there was also a clear empathy component. As Abbi shared, once someone participates in even a single survey, it's hard not to fall in love with the species they are studying. Close-up photos revealed individual quirks: pollen-dusted legs, worn wings, even tiny tongues peeking out of the bumble bees they surveyed. Staff worked together in an informal "assembly line," carefully caring for bees fostering both connection and pride.

Looking ahead, ZooMontana hopes to expand these efforts through staff training, volunteer involvement, and community workshops that empower people to conduct surveys in their own gardens and neighborhoods. By starting small, embracing trial and error, and centering empathy alongside data collection, ZooMontana is demonstrating how community science can be both impactful and personal! If you are curious to learn more about how ZooMontana collaborated with the Xerces society to launch this program, you can reach out to Abbi here.

# Awareness to Action: Using the Transtheoretical Model to Support Empathy Adoption

Empathy for wildlife can mean very different things to the organizations across our Network. Some are fully embracing empathy-centered practices, while others are still unsure how this approach fits into their mission. This month, we're sharing a powerful framework from Jen Rudolph, Manager of Ambassador Animal Programs at Roger Williams Park Zoo, that was adapted to fit a process for adopting empathy into our organizations.

This original model is named the **Transtheoretical Model (TTM)** and was originally developed by Prochaska and DiClemente (1983), to demonstrate that behavior change happens in stages. Rather than jumping directly from "not doing something" to "fully integrated," individuals and organizations move through predictable phases of readiness as described by the TTM. Jen's work with TTM grew out of a research fellowship with Antioch University New England, where she explored how the model could be applied to sustainability efforts in zoos along with colleagues Dr. Nichole Nageotte, Dr. Joe Heimlich, and Victoria Threadgill. What emerged was a framework simple enough to use in real-world settings, yet powerful enough to guide complex cultural change like adopting empathy as a shared practice.

Before diving into these stages, Jen emphasizes that progress begins with a collective definition. Organizations must first come to a shared understanding of what "empathy" actually means in their specific context to ensure everyone is working toward the same goal. Once that foundation is set, empathy adoption can move from an abstract concept into clear, actionable practices, such as:

- Visitor and community engagement that starts with "What matters to you?" rather than telling people what they should care about.
- Animal care approaches that recognize individual preferences and emotional states alongside established protocols.
- Internal culture where staff feel safe expressing challenges and leaders ask, "What are you experiencing?".
- Conservation messaging that acknowledges competing values and real constraints, rather than pushing harder against resistance.

Importantly, she stresses that empathy adoption does not mean abandoning science, professionalism, or objectivity. Instead, it strengthens decision-making by deepening understanding of perspectives and strengthening relationships between staff, visitors, community and animals.

Once a groundwork is laid, the model encourages users to explore the **five stages of adoption**—in this case, empathy adoption.

The five stages of change are **Precontemplation, Contemplation, Preparation, Action, and Maintenance.**

In **Precontemplation**, empathy is simply not on the radar. Organizations in this stage may view empathy as outside their mission, unnecessary, or even at odds with science-based work. Common responses include, "We're about data, not feelings," or "Our current approach works fine." At this stage, progress doesn't come from mandates or training. Instead, gentle awareness-building such as sharing peer success stories or research connecting empathy to conservation outcomes.

In **Contemplation**, empathy is being considered, but ambivalence remains. Leaders and staff may see potential value while also worrying about time, resources, staff buy-in, or professional credibility. What helps here is honest dialogue: acknowledging concerns, exploring both benefits and tradeoffs, and offering low-risk pilot opportunities that allow organizations to test ideas.

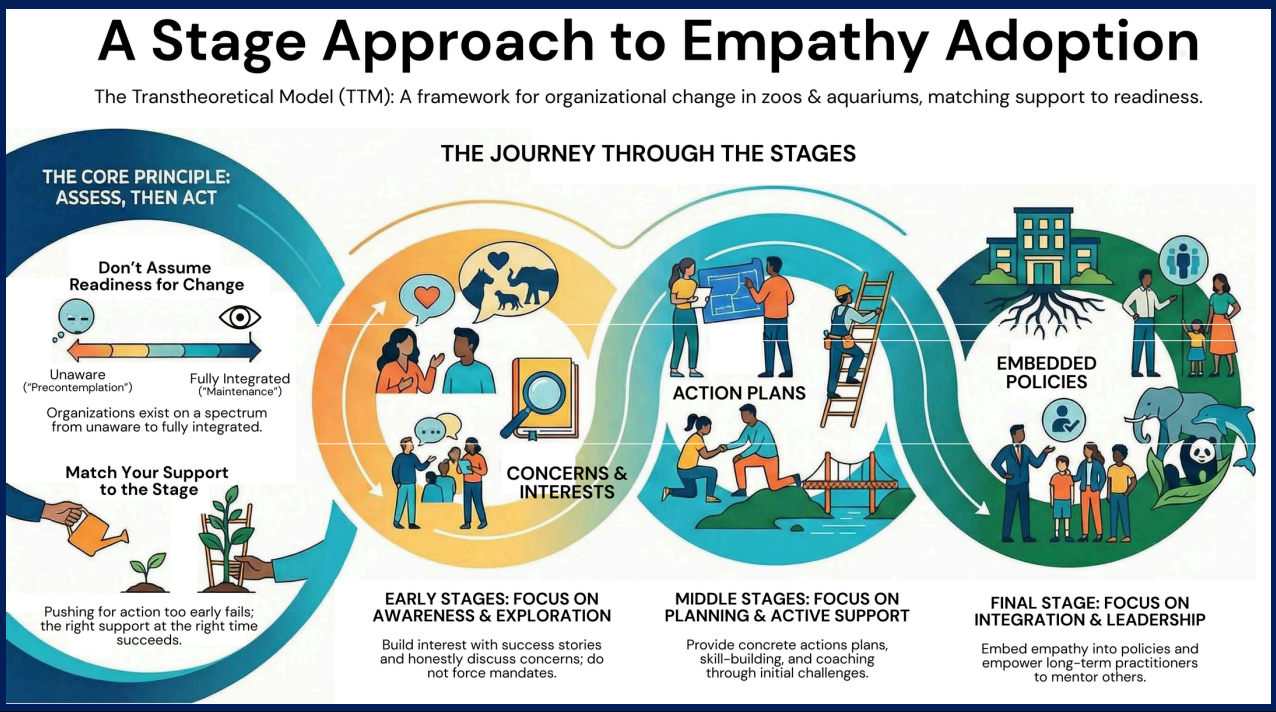
**Preparation** is the stage where intention becomes tangible. Organizations are actively planning to integrate empathy into their work and asking practical questions: Where do we start? Who should be involved? What does success look like?

In the **Action** stage, empathy practices are actively being implemented. This is often the most effort-intensive phase, requiring learning, adjustment, and patience. Early wins may appear alongside real challenges, including uneven staff participation or uncertainty about how to respond in difficult moments. Ongoing coaching, peer support, and celebrating progress are critical for sustaining momentum.

Finally, **Maintenance** is reached when empathy is no longer a special initiative, but an integrated part of how the organization operates. Empathy is embedded in policies, onboarding, evaluation, and leadership practices. While effort is still required, it becomes more intuitive and self-reinforcing.

This adaptation of the TTM shows that empathy adoption prioritizes relationship-building over checking boxes. It reframes empathy not as a mandate, but as a practice that grows over time. For those interested in exploring this framework more deeply, **this linked document** expands on each stage of empathy adoption, offers reflection prompts for self-assessment, and outlines stage-appropriate strategies for moving forward. Jen also welcomes those who are interested in this model to reach out with any questions via email: **jenrudolph401@gmail.com**, or feel free to connect with **Jen on LinkedIn.**

*Jen's approach builds on emerging research applying the TTM to conservation behaviors, including prior zoo studies by Dierking et al. (2004) and Nageotte (2019), and a comprehensive review published in Zoo Biology (Abrash Walton et al., 2022) examining the TTM as a tool for conservation practitioners."*



# EMPATHY MATTERS

## ACE FOR WILDLIFE® NETWORK

*JANUARY 2026*



Season's greetings everyone, and welcome to 2026! We hope you all had time to relax and recharge over the holidays.

Starting off the year strong, we are thrilled to announce that Woodland Park Zoo has secured funds from a new private donor to support the ACE for Wildlife Network over the next two years! In the first year, these funds will enable us to hire a curriculum developer to create learning pathways and workshops on empathy content informed by existing Network resources. If you know of folks who might be interested in this opportunity, you can forward them the link to this RFP. We will also now be able to offer conference scholarships to affiliates (more information to come in February). Work in the second year of the grant will likely focus on research collaborations, though we will wait to see what the strategic planning process brings to the surface before we finalize those plans. Thanks to everyone's quality work in helping us secure these additional funds.

**Announcements:**

**2026 Virtual Empathy Summit:** Our annual Summit is fast approaching – please view our agenda here and be sure to register in the events section below.

**Applying for Partnership:** Our applications for an organization to join as a Network Partner are closing March 31st. If your organization is interested in taking this step, please visit this page and navigate to the "Organizational Participation" tab located in the **how to join** section. The next window will be in September if your organization needs more time.

**Committee Updates:** See what our committees are working on in this document.

**Upcoming Events**

To learn more and register for each event, please go to our events page **here.**

**January 13 @ 10 am - 11 am | Coffee chat: Empathy training methods for front line staff**

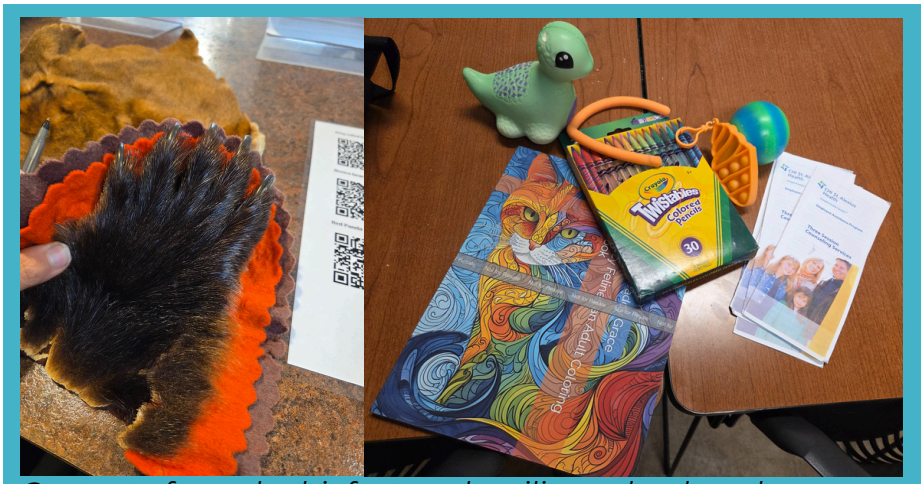
**January 21 @ 10:00 am - 11:30 am | Coffee Chat: Words that Matter Workshop**

**January 28 @ 11:30 am - 1:00 pm | ACE for Wildlife Network Onboarding Session: Winter Session**

**February 10 - 12, 2026 | Virtual Empathy Summit**

# Backpack, Backpack! Enhancing Inclusion and Staff Wellbeing through Backpack-Based Resources

Roosevelt Park Zoo has embraced a creative, compassion-driven approach to improving experiences for guests and staff alike—all through one simple tool: a backpack. This month, we explored two programs that use the simple tool of a backpack to improve zoo offerings: one designed to improve accessibility for zoo guests, and another focused on fostering a healthier, more supportive workplace culture.



*Contents from the biofact and resilience backpacks*

The **Biofacts Backpack** program began with a simple request from a teacher visiting the zoo with a visually impaired student who needed additional ways to engage with animals beyond sight. This inquiry prompted Public Programs Manager Ashley Bonen and Education Coordinator Travis Heil to consider how tactile objects and audio elements could deepen connections with animals, regardless of ability.

Their solution was a backpack filled with carefully selected biofacts that guests can carry with them as they move through the zoo. The backpack is free to rent and available to all visitors, making it an inclusive option for school groups, families, and individuals seeking a more sensory-rich experience. Inside, guests can explore lion fur, a red panda skull replica, cast tiger paw prints, giraffe hair, and more, all offering hands-on opportunities to feel textures and forms that would otherwise be out of reach.

To further enhance engagement, the team added QR codes linking to curated animal calls. These links allow guests to hear what animals like tigers or lions sound like, even when they are quiet on habitat. While the zoo currently has just one Biofacts Backpack due to limited materials, strong community response and local media interest point toward future expansion. Staff also envision incorporating volunteers to guide guests through biofacts or creating themed routes that align with specific habitats.

Roosevelt Park Zoo continues to explore additional sensory elements, such as scent strips that represent smells cats enjoy, or objects marked with claw grooves to demonstrate animal strength. Feedback from guests has been overwhelmingly positive, with many sharing how meaningful the added accessibility has been to their visit.

Inside the staff break room, another backpack serves an entirely different purpose. Following an intentional effort to evaluate and improve staff morale, leadership introduced **“Resilience Backpacks”** which are kits filled with fidgets, therapeutic coloring books, stress balls, resource guides, and information about counseling services. These tools provide grounding and comfort during difficult days, encouraging staff to pause, decompress, and seek support when needed. Paired with open-door communication, clear expectations for healthy workplace interactions, and shared accountability between managers and staff, the Resilience Backpacks have become a well-utilized and valued resource. Their use during meetings and downtime demonstrates how small, tangible supports can make a meaningful difference in workplace wellbeing.

Together, Roosevelt Park Zoo’s backpack programs highlight a powerful lesson: inclusive guest experiences and positive staff culture don’t always require large budgets, just creativity, empathy, and a willingness to listen. You can learn more about this program by reaching out to the Roosevelt Park Zoo’s education team here.

# 2026 Learning Groups

Have you been working on exciting empathy-related projects that you want to share with the ACE for Wildlife Network? Now's your chance! Our 2026 Learning Group Expression of Interest form is now live. We trial ran a similar system last year and had great success. This year, we've made a few changes and hope that it's even better. Before submitting an expression of interest, please review the learning group planning document in full.

## What are learning groups?

Our learning groups are virtual events that provide opportunities to interrogate and share new, or build upon existing, ideas together through a series of presentations and conversation. To better meet community needs, they will look a little bit different moving forward. These events will now be 75 minutes long with presenter-prepared discussion prompts and presentation parameters clearly outlined for greater continuity.

## What will they focus on?

Based on responses from our Member and Affiliate survey as well as other feedback avenues, we have identified six topics that we would love to host learning groups on. Those topics are:

- *Empathy in summer camp programming*
- *Integrating empathy into everyday projects*
- *Using effective empathy practices when talking about invasive species*
- *Identifying what critical anthropomorphism is, and is not*
- *When is empathy not the answer?*

However, we encourage anyone interested in presenting on an empathy-related project to complete the form, even if it falls outside of the parameters of pre-identified topics. Sign me up!

The expression of interest form will be live through **February 16**. All individuals submitting a proposal through the form must be a Network Member or Affiliate. Our 2026 learning groups will be decided on and scheduled accordingly based on the submissions received.

All questions should be directed to Emily Bernhardt, Empathy Network Specialist. Thank you in advance for your contributions to advance the collective knowledge of this powerful community of practice!

# THANK YOU!

Thank you to all of our dedicated committee representatives who have worked together all year to make the Network a better place for everyone. We couldn't do this work without you!

## Communications Committee

*Co-chair:* Delanie Jellison, Santa Barbara Zoo
*Co-chair:* Natalie Stier, Utah's Hogle Zoo. Transferring to the Steering Committee in 2026.
Brent Weston, Dakota Zoo
Cher Vatalaro, Lehigh Valley Zoo
Leanne Schuh, Grizzly & Wolf Discovery Center
Liz Hines, Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium

## Conservation Action Committee

*Co-chair:* Erica Carnes, Blank Park Zoo
*Co-chair:* Kelsey Raffel, Zoological Society of Milwaukee
Bethanie West, Idaho Falls Zoo
Brooke Tucker, ZooMontana
Toby Seegert, Zoological Society of Milwaukee

## DEAI Committee

*Chair:* Crystal Fox, Lake Superior Zoo
Abigail Flores, Racine Zoo
Alejandra Medina, Minnesota Zoo
Julie Pickard, Zoological Society of Milwaukee
Kirinne Slaughter, Visitor Studies Association
Sharon Spencer, Jacksonville Zoo and Botanical Gardens

## Membership Committee

*Co-chair:* Autumn Russell, Akron Zoo
*Co-chair:* Isabelle Bieser, Zoological Society of Milwaukee
Chris Berg, Shedd Aquarium. Term ended in December.
Heather Harelson Nutick, Conservation Society of California Oakland Zoo. Term ended in December.

## Steering Committee

*Interim co-chair:* Aszya Summers, Lincoln Park Zoo. Rotated off in May.
*Co-chair:* Liz Gilles, Minnesota Zoo
*Co-chair:* Shana Kent, Alaska Sealife Center
Austin Reich, Zoo Boise
Courtney Cordova, Henry Vilas Zoo
Hannah Tilden, Woodland Park Zoo. Term ended in December.

## Strategic Learning Committee

*Chair:* Jessica Schellhorn, Blank Park Zoo
Cameron Whitley, Western Washington University
Dani Ford, ZooMontana
Jennifer Gauble, Saint Louis Zoo
Monica Digre, Como Park Zoo & Conservatory. Rotated off in August.