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Wildlife Safari opens new Animal Health Center



From left, Wildlife Safari associate veterinarian Kirsten Thomas, head veterinarian Benji Alcantar and executive director Dan Van Slyke cut a ceremonial ribbon to mark the opening of a new animal health center at Wildlife Safari in Winston on Tuesday.



Ladies Auxiliary of Wildlife Safari Committee chair Tonya Theiss-Skrip, left, and member Sharon Ridens-Sparks stand in a surgical suite as they tour the new animal health center at Wildlife Safari in Winston on Tuesday.



Guests gather for a ribbon cutting ceremony marking the opening of a new animal health center at Wildlife Safari in Winston on Tuesday.

WINSTON — Wildlife Safari officially celebrated the completion of its Animal Health Center during a ribbon cutting ceremony Tuesday, where more than 50 supporters toured the facility that's been open for about a month.

When Wildlife Safari was first created, it was slated to be a drive-through park with multiple animals.

“The problem with a lot of animals is that they need a lot of care,” said Dan Van Slyke, the park's executive director.

A majority of the animals at the park are wild and they come in a wide range of sizes, from as small as a baby chick to as large as an elephant, so they're in need of specialized care. The new animal hospital easily provides them with that.

Since the park opened in 1972, it's been working under less than optimal conditions, struggling to make animals comfortable after surgeries that required the animals to convalesce following anesthesia.

“We were able to care for the animals initially, but we really didn't have a facility where we could keep them in, where it was nice and warm, to let them really get healed up before we turned them loose,” Van Slyke said.

The new center now keeps animals comfortable with an in-floor heating system that relies on hot water radiant heat that's located underneath the cement floors.

“Our number one responsibility is the care of these animals,” Van Slyke said. “If you're going to have animals, then it's paramount that you do a good job in taking care of them.”

Animal care has always been adequate, but now it's improved, he said.

The new hospital is a renovation of a prior structure built on the safari property about 10 years ago. It was originally intended for a lion/tiger breeding program. It was partially complete with cement floors and cinderblock walls.

“It was a flawed design for a lion/tiger building, but it really lend itself to the possibility for an animal hospital,” Van Slyke said.

He consulted with the park’s veterinarians and discussed modifying the building’s interior to create a state-of-the art animal hospital with holding facilities where the animals could be cared for in a warm environment.

About a year ago, the park’s board of directors agreed that an animal health center would be a beneficial project, so the park moved forward in seeking grant funding. Finding matching grants was easy because the building was already three-quarters built.

The park then rounded up all the funding. Since June, it completely renovated the building, added new plumbing and electrical infrastructure, and made substantial upgrades to bring in sophisticated equipment.

The center has two offices and 14 rooms such as a pharmacy, a surgical prep room, a laboratory, a small animal ward, a recovery room, a nursery, a laundry room and an X-ray room. The construction was completed entirely with grant funding.

Through other fundraisers like the annual Ladies Auxiliary of Wildlife Safari auction, which raised more than \$117,000 this year, the park was able to purchase critical equipment like a portable digital X-ray machine and an ultrasound machine. This is an improvement over the park’s old X-ray machine, which still used film.

“Diagnostics is crucial with animals because animals can’t talk and they can’t tell you what’s wrong with them,” Van Slyke said. “Being able to X-ray them in the field and/or at the facility itself is just exceptional.”

Another benefit of the new animal hospital is that it can now provide veterinary students, who come to the park from all over the world, with an opportunity to be educated with modern equipment in a modern hospital.

“It’s the first time since the park’s been built that I feel really confident, that not only are we able to get on the front end of these animals to give them proper care, but as they’re recuperating, we now have a facility that gives them proper heat and proper conditions to really get healed up before we turn them loose,” he said.

Contributing foundations were Autzen, ESCO and Ford Family, along with Karen M. Schroth Charitable Foundation for Animals, Meyer Memorial Trust and M.J. Murdock Charitable Trust. Individual donors were the Engle Family, Allyn and Cheryl Ford, and David and Kelley

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of 3

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