

BY KIT BERNARDI



you've ever wanted to pet a beluga whale, paint with a rhino or make dinner for a meerkat, check out these Illinois zoos, where caregivers conduct behind-the-scenes animal encounters in protected and controlled settings.

Home to 18 Backstage Adventures enrichment programs, the **Brookfield Zoo** (14 miles west of Chicago) gives animal-lovers plenty of chances for interaction. At the Flippers and

coral and rays also live. Penguin and Beluga Encounters let guests touch animals and learn training techniques. As Trainer for the Day, visitors assist trainers in their routine, caring for and feeding belugas, dolphins, sea otters, sea lions and penguins. All Shedd programs address global conservation and sustainable seafood initiatives.

More than 300 animals from around the world call Coal Valley's **Niabi Zoo** home. The 40-acre facility near the

Quad Cities hosts Big Cat and Giraffe Encounters. Trainers show and tell guests how they care for the zoo's endangered leopards and bobcats, prepare their yards, and conduct medical checkups and enrichment playtime sessions. Visitors also stand eye-to-eye with African giraffes and watch them use their long tongues to eat honey from a muffin tin while trainers explain the gentle beasts' behavior.

## UNLEASH YOUR WILD SIDE LEARNING ABOUT LAND AND SEA CREATURES (AND EFFORTS TO ENSURE THEIR SURVIVAL) WITH A VISIT TO ILLINOIS ZOOS AND AQUARIUMS.

Fins experience, participants help keepers do health checkups and training exercises for seals and dolphins. During the Rhino Rembrandt program, guests assist a black rhino with painting a picture (he holds a brush with his lower lip). On the Great Ape Escape tour of Tropic World, visitors talk with trainers, while staff members prepare food for the primates. Children delight in the Fragile Kingdom Desert's Mole Rats, Meerkats and More program, creating meals and serving them to the curious creatures.

At Chicago's lakefront Museum Campus, the **Shedd Aquarium's** interpretive tours explore habitats, water quality and microbiology labs, kitchens and hospital facilities for 32,000 animals. Extraordinary Experiences programs include the Shark Feeding Tour, led by aquarists in the Wild Reef exhibit, where exotic



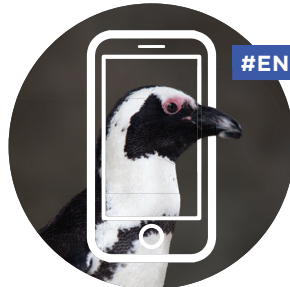
SPOTLIGHT ON...

# LINCOLN PARK ZOO

Opened in 1868, Chicago's free neighborhood zoo is one of the nation's oldest, but it's always evolving.

Endangered African penguins are among the newest residents, thanks to the addition of the *Robert and Mayari Pritzker Penguin Cove*. The exhibit, which can house a colony of up to 30 penguins, simulates their natural habitat on South Africa's Cape. Visitors love watching the creatures waddle on the beach and play underwater tag, torpedoing around crustacean-covered rocks.

The new 11,000-square-foot *Walter Family Arctic Tundra* exhibit is home to a polar bear. The outdoor playground reflects the bear's natural environment with a waterfall, dig pits and pools with underwater viewing areas. Guests get a feel for the bear's



#ENJOYILLINOIS

Share your pics of the zoo's newest arrivals on Twitter and Instagram with @lincolnparkzoo.

frigid homeland by touching an ice wall and entering a chilly cave.

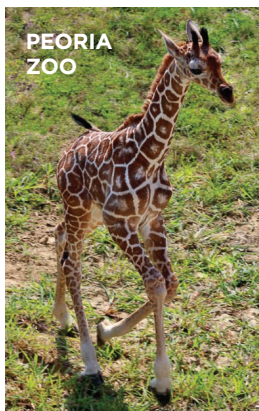
The recently renovated *Kovler Seal Pool*—home to a blended family of gray and harbor seals—marks an additional expansion as part of the zoo's \$125 million improvement plan. Future plans include renovating the *Kovler Lion House* and building a new visitors center.



## 7 MORE SPOTS TO GET WILD

### PEORIA ZOO

*Peoria*  
The new *Africa!* exhibit nearly doubled the size of this classic zoo. Visitors can stand inches from a lion playfully pawing the glass, and look for rhinos and zebras wandering across the area.



### MILLER PARK ZOO

*Bloomington*  
Trot around the world with themed exhibits, such as *Animals of Asia*, *Tropical America Rainforest* and the new flamingo habitat. Kids love the hands-on ZooLab, carousel and the daily seal, leopard, bear and tiger feedings.

### HENSON ROBINSON ZOO

*Springfield*  
More than 90 species native to the Americas, Asia, Africa and Australia live here, next to Lake Springfield. Docent-led animal encounters teach guests about creatures' behaviors and the zoo's conservation efforts.

### COSLEY ZOO

*Wheaton*  
This compact zoo houses Illinois wildlife and Midwest farm animals. Red foxes, turkey vultures, raccoons and owls are among those living in 20 natural habitat areas.





PHOTOGRAPHS: (BIKES) ADAM ALEXANDER/COURTESY OF CHOOSE CHICAGO, (PENGUINS) JULIA FULLER/LINCOLN PARK ZOO, (POLAR BEAR) COURTESY OF LINCOLN PARK ZOO, (GIRAFFE) COURTESY OF PEORIA PARK DISTRICT, (TRAIN) COURTESY OF DECATUR PARK DISTRICT, (CAT) COURTESY OF WILDLIFE PRAIRIE PARK

**SCOVILL ZOO** *Decatur*

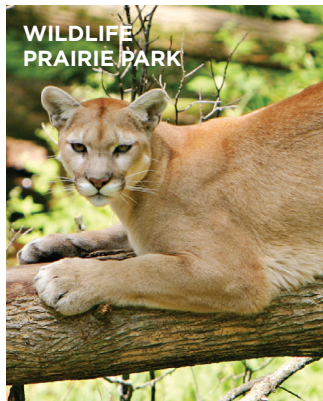
More than 400 animals, including big cats, camels, alligators, scorpions and tarantulas, reside at this lakeside zoo, which is especially committed to cheetah conservation. Visitors take tours aboard a replica 1863 steam train and ride a hand-carved wooden carousel.



**WILDLIFE PRAIRIE PARK**

*Hanna City/Peoria*

An easy 1.5-mile hiking trail through woodlands passes enclosures housing rescued wildlife native to the Midwest. Cougars, black bears and bison live in this recreation park, which also offers fishing, wildlife talks, and 20 miles of hiking, mountain biking and running trails.



**PHILLIPS PARK ZOO**

*Aurora*

North American birds of prey, reptiles, a cougar and farmyard animals live in this free zoo in a lakeside park. At the Stover Visitors Center, view mastodon bones found on the park's grounds.