



# ZOO NEW YORK

EXECUTIVE REPORT  
OCTOBER 2024



# Executive Report

**To:** The Watertown City Council  
The Jefferson County Board of Legislators  
Assemblyman Scott Gray  
New York State Senator Mark Walczyk

**CC:** City of Watertown City Manager  
Jefferson County Administrator

**From:** Mark Irwin, Interim Executive Director

**Date:** October 4, 2024

## Introduction

Over the past 12 months, Zoo New York has faced a period of extraordinary change and challenges, marked by uncertainties about its future. Yet, through this time of transition, we have remained steadfast in our mission to serve as an educational, cultural, and conservation resource for the North Country. Rather than be discouraged, we embraced these challenges as opportunities to innovate, deepen community partnerships, and strengthen the zoo's role as a vital regional asset.

The ongoing support from our community, volunteers, and local businesses has been both humbling and inspiring. The zoo's contributions to local tourism, education, and conservation align with the region's broader goals of economic development and community engagement. Partnerships with organizations like Samaritan Medical Center and Encompass Recreation, which provide their staff and members with zoo admission access, further exemplify our commitment to inclusivity and community outreach. To date, we have secured nearly \$100,000 in sponsorships, and \$34,000 in in-kind donations – testament to the community's belief in our vision and responsible stewardship. These contributions allow us to continue offering quality experiences for guests while focusing on long-term sustainability. We are committed to full financial transparency and adhering to best practices to ensure every contribution is maximized for the zoo's success.

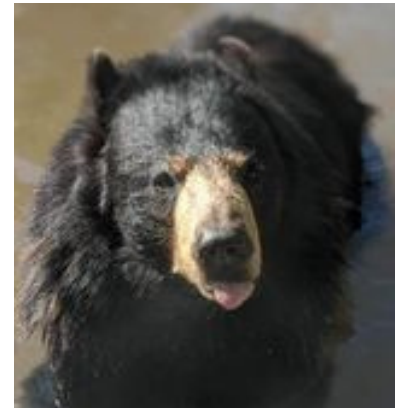
This report provides updates on our initiatives and the current status of our community's zoo, serving as a follow-up to the many discussions we've had over the past year. It highlights our recent achievements and outlines our future goals, reaffirming our commitment to growing as an institution and remaining a valued community resource while we seek a stable foundation for the future.



## Event Sponsorships

Our 2024 season has been highly successful, driven by community engagement and corporate sponsorship for key fundraising events like Eclipse Day, Brew at the Zoo, Boo at The Zoo, and Winter Wonder Lights. These events attract local families and also helps us achieve our larger goals of drawing regional tourism to the North Country. Presenting, patron, and support sponsorships have nearly sold out, illustrating the continued commitment of our sponsors and the widespread appeal of these experiences.

Key sponsors, including SeaComm Federal Credit Union, Samaritan Medical Center, and Northern Credit Union have shown sustained support, sponsoring multiple events. Their belief in the zoo's long-term mission strengthens our resolve to ensure responsible and impactful use of all funds raised. Other dedicated sponsors include: Morrison's Furniture, Sundance Leisure, Morgia Wealth Management, Doors Plus, LA Quarry, IBEW Local 910, Dry Hill Ski Area, Fabco, and Lawman Heating & Cooling



## Habitat Sponsorships

We are excited by the ongoing development of our wildlife habitats, which are key to enriching the visitor experience. Securing sponsorship for habitats represents a major step forward in this effort. We've partnered with local businesses, including Carthage Savings Bank, Northern Credit Union, and SeaComm Credit Union, for the sponsorship of habitats ranging from the North American Otter habitat to the Northern Wolf Trail and the Butterfly House. Others include: Watertown Savings Bank, Advanced Business Systems, Majak Podiatry, Krafft Cleaning, Stephens Media. Of special note, our flagship exhibit, Phantoms of the Empire State has been sponsored by Samaritan Medical Center and is now home to "Abisko", the only wolverine in the entire Northeast region of the United States!

Each of these sponsorships is an investment in the zoo's future. Securing additional sponsors for our habitats remains a priority as we continue to enhance the visitor experience and the care of our wildlife.

---

## In-Kind Sponsorships

In-kind sponsors provide essential services that allow us to direct more resources toward our core mission. For instance, Stephens Media offers promotional support for our events through weekly interviews on Froggy97 & Z93, while Advanced Business Systems contributes printed materials, donates all of our IT services and provides marketing expertise. Channel 7 / WWNY has provided PSAs, nonprofit advertising benefits and interview opportunities at no cost. New partnerships, such as Thomas Trash's offer to haul waste at no cost, further exemplify the collaborative spirit that drives the zoo's success.

These partnerships exemplify responsible stewardship, as they enable us to achieve more without incurring additional costs.

## Howling Wolf Cafe & Gift Shop

The café and gift shop, vital components of the guest experience, have benefited from their first-ever sponsorship by Terry and Shelly Tontarski. Their support has led to critical upgrades, such as enhanced café offerings and new signage, positioning us to increase revenue while offering improved service.

This sponsorship reflects a forward-thinking approach that pairs community investment with operational improvement, ensuring a sustainable future for our guest services.

## Volunteer Program

Our volunteer program, led by our dedicated volunteer Leanne Frazee, has been a cornerstone of Zoo New York's success. With over 300 active volunteers donating more than 3,000 hours - excluding myself and members of the Board, the program has dramatically increased our capacity to engage the community, maintain operations, and provide an enriched experience for our visitors. These volunteers have been instrumental in everything from event staffing, cleanup projects, adoption of 15 gardens, animal diet preparation & enrichment, facility maintenance and educational outreach. Thanks to these dedicated individuals, the Zoo was represented at summer parades, Carthage Back-to-School Bash, YMCA Family Day and able to provide weekly children's book events and T-shirt tie-dye events. Also, of special note are our collaborative partnerships with organizations including THRIVE Wellness and Recovery (formerly Credo), The ARC, TV50, Disabled Persons Action Organization (DPAO), School Age Child Care Program of the YMCA, BOCES and JCC Zoo Technology, who have all contributed their time.

The immense growth of our volunteer program reflects the strength of our leadership, the trust of the community, and the shared commitment to the zoo's mission.

## Educational Teaching Volunteer (Docent) Program

Our docent program, led by long-time educational teaching volunteers Cindy Eisenhauer and Deltra Willis, has been reactivated to great success. These dedicated, trained volunteers are essential in enhancing our visitors' educational experience, complementing the work of our staff by providing tours, hosting animal presentations, and leading discussions on conservation.

The reintroduction of this program represents a return to our roots as an educational institution, fostering a deeper connection between our visitors and the natural world.

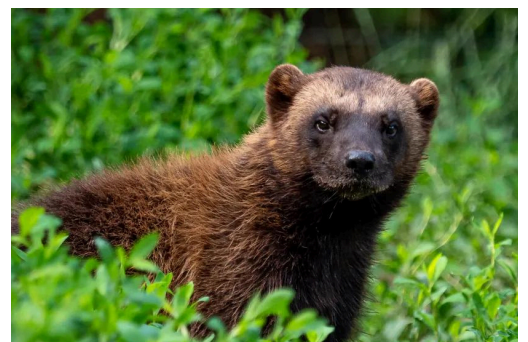
## Summer Adventure Series

The introduction of the Summer Adventure Series this August provided new programming for Zoo New York guests. Featuring daily animal presentations by experienced keepers, this initiative was met with overwhelming enthusiasm from our visitors. This investment in educational programming reflects our commitment to providing enriching, memorable experiences while staying true to our mission of wildlife conservation and public education.

We will continue to explore innovative ways to grow our educational offerings and improve guest engagement.

## Marketing Efforts

In addition to in-kind media sponsorships, Zoo New York has made significant investments in paid marketing to ensure greater visibility across various platforms. We secured billboards, television and radio commercials, and utilized social media platforms like Facebook to keep zoo members and the community updated on news and events. Furthermore, we launched a new TikTok account ([itsZooNewYork](#)), which has allowed us to reach a younger, more digitally engaged audience. Our multi-channel marketing approach not only promotes our events but also strengthens community engagement and reinforces our educational mission.



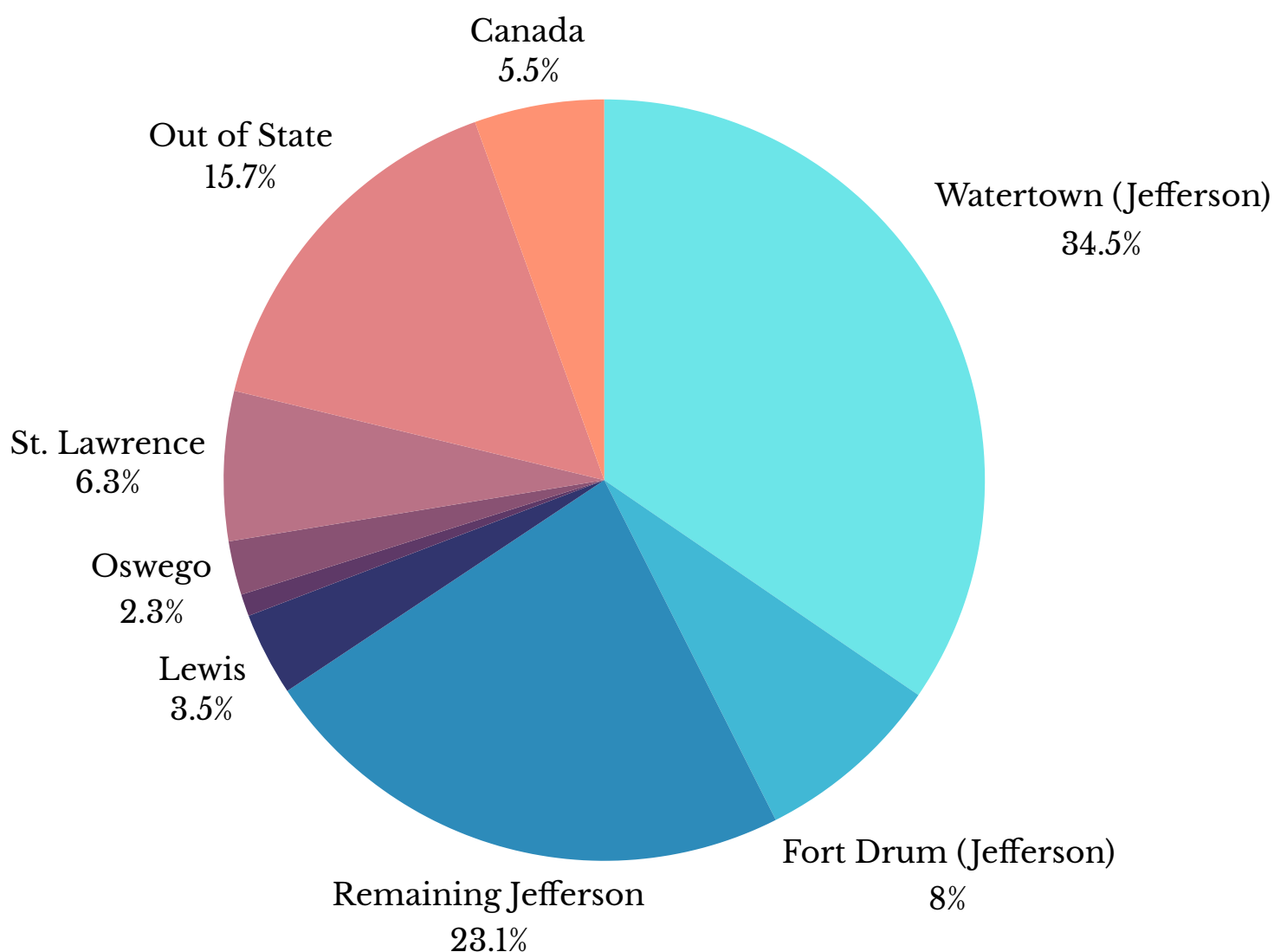
## Appreciation For Members & Supporters

Zoo New York is deeply grateful to our dedicated members, whose frequent, small donations have been crucial to keeping the zoo operating during challenging times. Their continued support, whether through membership renewals or additional gifts, demonstrates the community's belief in the zoo's mission, and we extend our sincere thanks to our elected policymakers. Their support has enabled us to implement many of the initiatives outlined in this report, helping us remain a valuable resource for northern New York.

Furthermore, we greatly appreciate the coverage we've received from our local media partners—TV, radio, newspapers, and online platforms—whose stories help bring attention to our efforts.

## Zoo Attendance

Through the end of August, we recorded approximately 20,000 admissions during a time of limited operations due to reduced staffing. This influx included a notable number of individuals traveling from various regions.



Attendance of 20K through August



## Building a Stronger Future

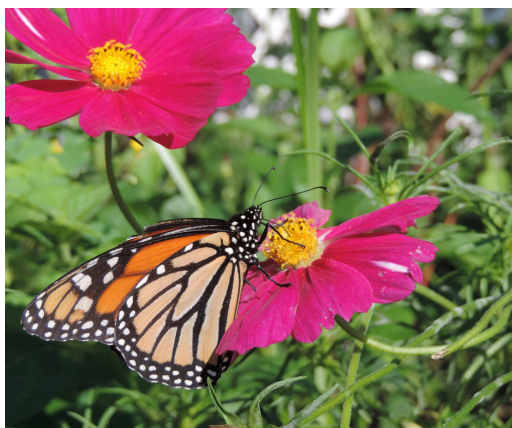
Through careful stewardship of both financial and in-kind donations, Zoo New York is positioning itself to be a center of conservation, education, and regional tourism for years to come. Zoo New York aims to generate significant economic impact for the North Country, attracting visitors from across the region and beyond. In doing so, we support local hotels, restaurants, and other small businesses, contributing to the overall vibrancy of the local economy. We see the zoo as more than just an attraction; it is a vital institution that enhances quality of life, drives tourism, supports local businesses, and educates the next generation about wildlife conservation. This makes the zoo a critical part of the North Country's future economic and cultural vibrancy.

## Invitation to Upcoming Events

As part of our commitment to fostering community engagement, we are excited to invite you to two of our most anticipated events of the year. Boo at the Zoo, a family-friendly trick-or-treat extravaganza, will be held during the last two weekends of October. This event offers a safe and fun environment for families to celebrate Halloween while exploring the zoo.

Additionally, we will host Winter Wonderlights, a magical holiday light display, lighting up the zoo on Friday and Saturday evenings through December. These events offer unique and festive experiences for the whole family!

Please consider joining us and participating in these exciting events to share in the joy they bring to our community.



## Conclusion

While we have made considerable progress, there is much work still ahead. We are focused on building a financially sustainable future that allows Zoo New York to thrive as a key part of the North Country's social, educational, and environmental fabric. Our goals are ambitious, but with the continued support of our volunteers, sponsors, and local leaders like you, we are confident in our ability to succeed.

We invite all members of our community to join us in shaping the future of Zoo New York at Thompson Park —whether through support for key initiatives, community advocacy, or direct engagement in our events. Together, we can ensure the zoo remains a cornerstone of our community, fostering education, conservation, and family-friendly entertainment for generations to come.

We deeply appreciate your ongoing support and commitment to Zoo New York, and we look forward to continuing our partnership in building a brighter future for our region.

## Thank You to Our Sponsors!



**ADVANCED  
BUSINESS  
SYSTEMS**



**Terry and Shelly Tontarski**

