



AFRICAN SAFARI PARK RANGER ENJOYS WILDLIFE

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"HAVE A WILD DAY" Senior enjoys wildlife and people as a Park Ranger

by Mary Anne White

Rick Weninger enjoys walking on the wild side. After retirement he moved to Lake Erie and was captain of a boat that took people on fishing excursions. His skills in communication and safety preparedness are now fused with his enjoyment of animals in his role as a park ranger at Ohio's African Safari Wildlife Park.

From March through November, Weninger patrols the 65-acre Safari drive-thru section of the park where people can feed bison, zebras, and giraffes from inside their vehicles. The smaller walk-thru section of the park is known as Safari Junction and offers the opportunity to see kangaroos, lemurs, porcupines, tortoises, gibbons, and other animal species. Weninger is responsible for the safety of the animals and visitors. This includes rule enforcement, emergency response, and the monitoring of park boundaries, fences, animal holding areas, and natural resources.

Weninger shows great enthusiasm for all aspects of his work when he says, "What I most enjoy about my work is caring for the animals; and, I like my co-workers." His personal favorite among the animals is the emu. Native to Australia, these flightless birds can grow to be six-feet-tall and weigh 100 to 150 pounds. Emu are intelligent, recognize their caretakers,



Rick Weninger, Park Ranger

and engage in a form of goofy dancing when they get excited. Weninger explains, "I like that they are unpredictable, and it's fun to watch them chase the geese. Sometimes they chase the geese into the pond."

According to Weninger, "The favorite animal of most visitors to the park is the giraffe. People come into the park asking if the giraffes are out, and people like feeding them. Goats are popular with people, too—and recently, people have shown an increased interest in seeing and learning more about capybaras."

One of the more unique animals of the park is a white alligator. When asked if it is an albino alligator, Weninger replied, "I don't know. I haven't gotten close enough to see if it is albino." (Research

later confirmed that this resident of the park is a 24-year-old albino alligator named Jewel.)

The drive-thru Safari experience allows visitors to feed animals from inside their vehicles and can provide memories for a lifetime. Weninger recalled a recent event: "A bison stuck its head inside a vehicle and licked a woman's face. Her screams of laughter caused the bison to quickly back its head out of the car window."

The park's Scottish Highland cows, also known as "hairy cows" are docile and friendly. Their long shaggy hair consists of a double coat—a long only outer coat and a downy undercoat—that protects them from severe wind, snow, and rain. One of the cows is known as Topaz. All of the cows are

given names of different kinds of gemstones.

The East African Ankole-Watusi cattle are known for having huge horns that can span eight feet from tip to tip. The horns appear massive, but are lightweight with a honeycomb structure, that helps regulate the cow's body temperature by circulating excess heat. Individual names of the Watusi cattle include Waffle, Muffin, Bagel, and Crepe. All of the Watusi cattle have names of breakfast foods.

Weninger explains the gemstone and breakfast food names for the animals. "It's easier to keep track of all the names of the animals by grouping them under separate categories."

Weninger welcomes visitors from everywhere. "I like to see the different license plates on cars that visit the park," says Weninger. "People have come here from Texas and Missouri. We even have a seasonal worker from Montana this year. We have veterinary and zoology students who come here to get field experience with animals, and our educational programs are great."

"Senior bus visits are popular, and younger visitors enjoy feeding and interacting or learning about different animals. There's something for everyone to enjoy!"

"Camels are no longer. See RANGER, page 10



The park offers a unique animal experience that involves everything from alpacas to zebras.

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