

Zoo Exploration Guide

We've created this guide to help you facilitate an educational tour at the Saint Louis Zoo. We have provided you a brief insider description about a few of our animal habitats and a few questions to help prompt a discussion with your group.

Working with animal needs

When we provide the proper care for an animal, we are addressing that animal's social needs and adaptations. At the Zoo, we have over 450 species. In Rivers' Edge, we have a wide variety of species. Each of these animals has its own social needs and adaptations to be addressed. How do we do this?

Where are the animals?

River's Edge provides immersive and naturalistic habitats. That means, you might have to look extra close or around a few corners to see the animals. The animals also choose where they spend their time and how they spend it, which may include in an off-viewing habitat. Keep your eyes peeled!

Social groupings

Some animals must live in social groups. Several of our animals in River's Edge live in family groups or coalitions. Zoo habitats for social animals must provide space for several animals to be together, but also provide areas to separate out an animal for special times like trainings, health checks or introductions to new animals.

Working with adaptations

Many of the animals in River's Edge have unique adaptations that keepers must understand in order to provide their care. Keepers often give an animal food, toys or features in their Zoo habitats that encourage an animal to display natural behaviors. We call this enrichment. For example, elephants naturally forage throughout the day, searching trees for fruit and juicy leaves. In the elephant Zoo habitat, you will notice trees and exposed cliffs with cavities in which keepers can hide food items. These cavities allow elephants to forage for food throughout the day.

At the Zoo...

While you explore the Zoo, take a few minutes to look at these aspects within each animal habitat. You will notice that each habitat provides these features in different ways.

At home or school...

Planning animal habitats is a great example of critical thinking. Pick your favorite animal and research its habitat requirements. Draw an exhibit or create one out of recyclable materials like a shoe box, paper towel tubes and bottle caps. Remember to not only include food, water, shelter and space, but also provide ways for keepers to access the space and an off-viewing space for the animal, as well as enrichment.

For more information about our animals and our animal care, visit our website: stlzoo.org



1. Painted dogs



Painted dogs are highly social and live in packs. Each member of the pack has a job – hunting, caring for young, etc. In the wild, pack members build strong bonds using good communication and problem-solving skills. Keepers provide team enrichment for these animals, which encourages them to work together and helps strengthen the bond in the pack.

- Are the dogs together? Why do you think they stay close together?
- Do you see any enrichment?
- Do you see any of the dogs interacting with one another?

2. Nile Hippopotamus



Hippos have amazing adaptations for their aquatic lifestyle. They can hold their breath for 5 minutes. Their eyes, ears, and nose sit at the top of their heads so they can use their senses while most of their body stays underwater. Hippos spend their daytime hours relaxing in the water and emerge at night to feast on their favorite food: grasses! The fish that share their habitat feed off of their poop and help keep the hippos' skin clean.

- How many hippos do you see? Are they swimming or sleeping?
- Do you see fish interacting with the hippos?
- How do you think keepers keep the hippos' pool clean?



3. Cheetahs



Female cheetahs live alone except for the time she is raising her young. Males live in coalitions of two to five individuals. The coalition is a lifelong, beneficial bond between brothers as they defend a territory, hunt, and search for mates together. Keepers are well-versed in both the social and physical needs of these specialized animals and use their knowledge when designing enrichment for them. For example, cheetahs are adapted to run quickly for short distances. Their habitat and the items in it, encourage the cheetahs to run.

- How many cheetahs are in the public viewing habitat? Are you seeing males or a female?
- Do you see anything in the habitat that might encourage the cheetahs to run or climb?

4. Asian Elephants



Elephants have adaptations that allow them to utilize their habitat to meet their needs. Elephants use their muscular trunks to forage for food or to suck up water and pour it into their mouths. Elephants spend 12-18 hours a day feeding so they need a lot of food! Females and young elephants live together in family groups. We have several habitats that the Zoo's multi-generation Asian elephant family can explore.

- Do you see members of the Zoo's elephant family in a habitat? Can you tell which of elephants are the youngest? How can you tell?
- Do you see any areas that encourage the elephants to use their trunks?
- What do you think would be tricky about making a habitat for an elephant?