



como friends
THRIVE ON

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INSIDER



Photo by Sax-Zim Bog Naturalist Kelly Beasley

Beauty of the Bog
*With help from a Conservation
Champions grant, Como
horticulturists are calling
attention to one of Minnesota's
most valuable and vulnerable
ecosystems*

| Mark your Como calendar, and stay in the know with upcoming events! |

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COMO PARK ZOO & CONSERVATORY

Summer Hours: (May 1 – September 1) 10 am – 6 pm
Winter Hours: (September 2 – April 30) 10 am – 4 pm



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Como Friends is a nonprofit 501(c)3 organization whose mission is to inspire community generosity in support of Como Park Zoo and Conservatory so it thrives for generations to come.

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**COMO PARK
ZOO & CONSERVATORY**

1225 Estabrook Drive | St. Paul, MN 55103
www.comozooconservatory.org

Como Park Zoo and Conservatory's mission is to inspire our public to value the presence of living things in our lives.

Como Park Zoo and Conservatory is accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA). Look for the AZA logo whenever you visit a zoo or aquarium as your assurance that you are supporting a facility dedicated to providing excellent care for animals, a great experience for you, and a better future for all living things.



The American Public Gardens Association (APGA) serves and strengthens public gardens throughout North America by supporting and promoting their work, value and achievements in horticultural display, education, research and plant conservation.



DIRECTOR OF PARKS AND RECREATION: Andy Rodriguez

COMO FRIENDS INSIDER

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COMO NEWS & EVENTS



Join us in support of
Como Park Zoo & Conservatory!



SELLING FAST: DON'T MISS OUT ON COMO QUEST

Friday, October 17, 2025 | 9:00 AM – 11:30 AM

Save yourself from Como FOMO this fall by reserving your tickets to Como Quest today! Slated for MEA Weekend, this interactive, fun adventure for caregivers and kids is a great way to experience Como close up without the crowds.

Team up for a digital Goosechase scavenger hunt through the tundra of Polar Bear Odyssey, the rain-forest of Tropical Encounters, and more. Learn from Como's exceptional zookeepers, horticulturists, educators, and volunteers. Make this an MEA to remember by contributing to the future of Minnesota's most visited cultural destination.

Visit comofriends.org or call 651-487-8229 to secure your Como Quest tickets today!



SAY HELLO TO WICKET AND OMBE, COMO'S NEW RING-TAILED LEMURS

Como Zoo's primate building is the new home to Ombe and Wicket, two ring-tailed lemurs that recently arrived from the Milwaukee County Zoo. Native to Madagascar, these social primates are known for their distinctive striped tails, their strong scent glands (used to attract mates), and their super-chill sunbathing behavior, sometimes striking yoga-like poses as they soak up the rays. "Wicket likes to bask in the lights in the exhibit," says Primate Keeper Em Brunmeier, who is just getting to know these two new residents. "Ombe is quiet and curious, confident in his interactions with the keepers. He's quick to learn, and does an adorably good job training, always trying his best to get a treat."

You can help support Ombe and Wicket's warm welcome to Como Zoo by becoming an animal sponsor. For a limited time, Como Friends' new lemur sponsorship package includes two ring-tailed lemur plush animals, invitations to Como Friends' supporter-only events, and a subscription to *Como Friends Insider*, the quarterly magazine that covers all of Como's animals, plants, and people.





MAKE AN IMPACT AT COMO ON GIVE TO THE MAX DAY

Give to the Max Day is returning Thursday, November 20, so mark your calendar for this Minnesota tradition that makes an impact across the state. With early giving starting on November 1, you don't have to wait for Minnesota's great day of giving to make your online donation to support Como.

Stay tuned to Como Friends' social media for more about what your support makes possible at Como. From welcoming Como Zoo's cute new ring-tailed lemurs, to teaching the next generation all about the wonders of the natural world, your donation makes a difference.



LEAVE A LEGACY TO PRESERVE COMO'S HISTORY AND PROTECT COMO'S FUTURE

Founded by visionaries and volunteers more than a century ago, Como Park Zoo & Conservatory is a gift that keeps on giving. Leave a legacy to preserve Como's tradition of free admission and family-friendly programs by including Como Friends in your estate plan. Gifts of all sizes can make a big difference at Minnesota's most visited cultural destination.

For more information on planned giving, contact **Laurel Lundberg**, Director of Individual Giving, at laurel.lundberg@comofriends.org or 651-487-8296.



MARK YOUR COMO CALENDAR



SEP

SEPTEMBER 19 – OCTOBER 19 | FALL FLOWER SHOW PART ONE

Bright candy colors are the theme for the first half of the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory's Fall Flower Show, featuring mums, marigolds, celosia, and more.

OCT

OCTOBER 4 | SENSORY FRIENDLY MORNING

See Como without the crowds during these 9 a.m. early entry times created for visitors on the spectrum and their families. Additional dates: November 1 and December 6.

OCTOBER 7 | SENIOR STROLLS

Take time to smell the flowers at these late afternoon and early morning sessions created especially for Como's 55-plus crowd. Visit comozooconservatory.org for additional dates and details.

OCTOBER 14 | RED CROSS BLOOD DRIVE

Shore up Minnesota's blood supplies by making a donation at Como's Red Cross Blood Drive.

OCTOBER 17 | COMO QUEST

Make it an MEA Weekend to remember at Como Quest, our interactive, family-friendly fundraiser. Form your own teams to take part in a campus-wide scavenger hunt on the Goosechase app, or explore Como from up close without the crowds during this unforgettable early morning event.

OCTOBER 18 – 19 | CREEPY CRAWLY WEEKEND

Face your fears and get a little closer to the spooky and spectacular insects, reptiles, and carnivorous plants that make life on earth so interesting. With family-friendly programs throughout the day, you'll meet spiders, anacondas, and cockroaches that are all more fascinating than frightening. As temperatures dip this fall, our friends at **Xcel Energy** will also be on hand to share hot tips for conserving energy.

OCTOBER 24 – NOVEMBER 30 | FALL FLOWER SHOW PART TWO

Rich red, deep purple, and pale pink is the palette for the second half of Como's traditional chrysanthemum show.

NOV

NOVEMBER 1 | EARLY GIVING STARTS FOR GIVE TO THE MAX DAY

Early Giving starts for Give to the Max Day! Make your donation at GiveMN.org

NOVEMBER 3 – 9 | IKEBANA FLOWER SHOW

Find a moment of zen at Como's annual Ikebana Flower Show, featuring exceptional flower arrangements created by Ikebana International's Minneapolis-St. Paul chapter.

NOVEMBER 20 | GIVE TO THE MAX DAY

Give to the Max Day goes live! Follow @Comofriends on Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn to help celebrate Minnesota's great day of giving.

DEC

DECEMBER 4 | SPECIAL ACCESS: HOLIDAY SHOPPING & FLOWER SHOW

See a sneak peek of Como's Holiday Flower Show, and take advantage of great member discounts and free gift wrapping at Garden Safari Gifts. 4 p.m. to 7 p.m.

JAN

JANUARY 24 – 25 | WINTER CARNIVAL ORCHID SHOW

Now celebrating 51 years, the orchid show transforms the Conservatory into a breathtaking oasis filled with hundreds of rare and exquisite orchids—showcased by the Conservatory, the **Orchid Society of Minnesota**, and renowned local and national growers.

FEB

FEBRUARY 26 | SAVE THE DATE FOR BOUQUETS

Come in from the cold and celebrate the warmth and natural wonder of Como at Bouquets, Como Friends' most spirited fundraiser.



With its glossy leaves and deep red and purple coloring, the pitcher plant is one of Minnesota's most captivating natives. So captivating, in fact, that when insects are drawn into its invitingly vase-like body, they soon discover there's no way out. Tiny, down-drafting hairs inside the plant make it impossible for prey to find purchase before being drowned and digested by this carnivorous plant.

Native to Minnesota's peatlands, pitcher plants are just one of the fascinating featured players in a trio of "mini bogs" floating this season in the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory's Water Gardens. Created by Como horticulturists Bo Akinkuotu and Victoria Housewright, these miniature peatlands—and new interpretive signage nearby—are part of a larger Como Friends' Conservation Champions project designed to call attention to the beauty, diversity, and environmental benefits of the region's expansive bogs.

"Minnesota actually has more bogland than any state outside of Alaska, covering nearly six million acres," says Housewright. Forged more than 10,000 years ago with the retreat of the last glaciers, these swampy wetlands are "so acidic that plant matter can't decompose, and instead, builds and builds over time, creating layers and layers of peat. After thousands of years, bogs now capture twice as much carbon

THE BEAUTY OF THE BOG

With help from a Conservation Champions grant, Como horticulturists are calling attention to one of Minnesota's most valuable and vulnerable ecosystems

as all the world's forests, but if we lose them, it would be like a carbon bomb going off. That's why it's so important that we conserve them."

A GROWING PARTNERSHIP

One of the best places to see this unique ecosystem is in northern Minnesota's Sax-Zim Bog, a three-hundred square mile peatland about an hour's drive northwest of Duluth. Well known to birders who flock there to see northern owls, warblers, finches, and other boreal birds, the bog is just as impressive for its diverse plant life, which includes more than 750 species of wildflowers and terrestrial plants, trees, shrubs, grasses, mosses, and ferns.

"Bogs are having a moment and this is definitely one to see, so we came up with the idea of building a partnership with the Friends of the Sax-Zim Bog, a support organization like Como Friends," says Housewright. Together, Housewright and Akinkuotu wrote a Conservation Champions request proposing a donation to help the organization buy additional land to conserve, as well as the opportunity to bring home a sampling of the bog's most interesting plants to expand Como's educational collections. "We wanted it to be a partnership. They're the ones with the expertise and resources to protect and preserve the bog," she says, "and here at Como we have nearly two



million annual visitors that we can help get excited not just about this incredible ecosystem, but also about why conserving bogs matters so much in this time of the growing presence of climate change.”

WILD COLLECTING FOR COMO

In June, the pair traveled north to work with a naturalist at Sax-Zim Bog who helped them to identify and wild collect some of the peatland’s most notable species, like pitcher plants and sundews, leatherleaf and bog bean, pink lady’s slippers and heart-leaved twayblade. To minimize impact on other plants, the pair took only tiny samples and cuttings. “You can’t really dig in an environment as soggy as that—instead you’re just gently untangling roots from one plant to the next,” Akinkuotu explains.

The team took home nearly 60 individual plants that are now taking root behind the scenes in Como’s 30,000-square-foot greenhouse. Once established, Akinuotu says he’s looking forward to incorporating more of these bog beauties beyond the Water Garden, where the “mini bogs” have already been a big hit with visitors—and with visiting ducks who’ve been caught nestling in the moss, grasses, and pitcher plants.

“Even at this scale, you can see these mini bogs creating their own little biomes. We come out here to care for them every day and discover new spiders that have started webbing, more and more bugs that are attracted to these plants, and little tadpoles

Plants collected by Horticulturists Bo and Victoria include:

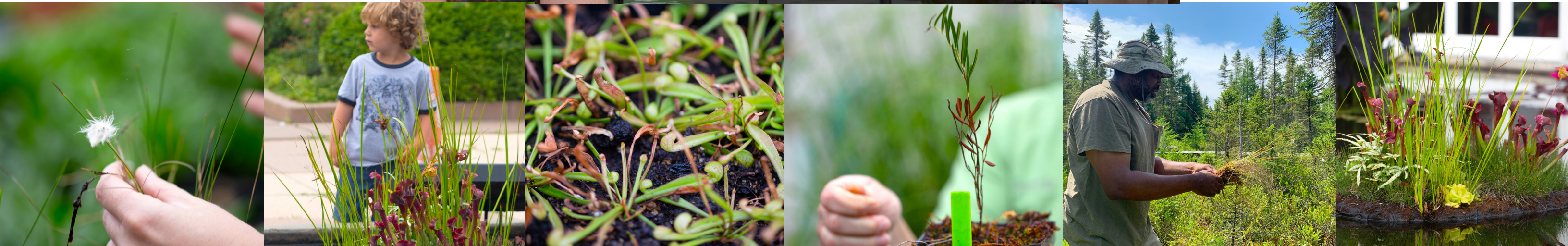
(in order of appearance)
Pitcher Plant
Round-Leaved Sundew
Cranberry
Star Flower
Sedges (various types)
Cotton Grass
Bog Rosemary

(not pictured)
Bog Myrtle
Lingonberry
Bog Bean

and frogs that will actually move in,” he says. “By bringing a little more attention to the Sax-Zim Bog, we want people to see how special these places are—and to know that conservation isn’t just something that happens far away. It’s right here at home.”

Your support for Como Friends helps support conservation projects at home and around the world through Conservation Champions, a competitive microgrant program for Como’s professional zookeepers, horticulturists, education specialists, and interpretive staff. Thank you!

All Sax-Zim Bog photos taken by naturalist Kelly Beaster



COMO CARES ABOUT KIDS

With expanding school partnerships, a refreshed curriculum, and a new strategic plan, Como's education department is rising to meet the needs of our next generation

As teachers will tell you, making the transition back to school can be tough. Even at summer camp, encountering new faces, new friends, and new surroundings can be stressful for many children—not to mention their parents.

That's why Como's education department just piloted a new program during Como's sold-out summer camp season designed to build even better relationships between Como and the nearly 500 families it served through the 12-week session. Through a new staff position, Como Cares Specialist Ruthie Schneider reached out to enrolled families each week to find out if incoming campers could use some extra support to make their summer camp experience a success.

"It's been a conversation in the camp field for a while, and especially after COVID, that we've been seeing more kids showing up at camp who need additional support," says Bekah Hanes, Como's Education & Conservation Curator. "In the past, if there was a camper or two who were struggling, it could take the whole class off track. But with this role, we have the resources, and this extra pair of hands, to help make the camp experience more meaningful for everyone. It's been a complete game changer."

Improving Access and Engagement

The new Como Cares specialist role is just a small piece in a much larger initiative aimed at meeting the growing needs of the more than 700,000 school-age visitors who come to Como each year. Driven by a new strategic plan supported by Como Friends, and based on feedback from parents and community partners, new findings about best practice strategies for promoting conservation education with kids, many of Como's education offerings are being reimagined to improve accessibility and engagement with kids of all ages and abilities.

For instance, the weekly free Little Explorers program for preschoolers, funded by Minnesota's Legacy Amendment, has been updated with more opportunities for imaginative play and activities that encourage kids to get to know different animals, plants, and the natural world. "It used to include a lot of activities and laminated sheets where kids had to have a parent helping out," says Program Specialist Erin Dimond. "Now with more manipulative things like

"It's a way of building a relationship with families, and making parents and campers feel reassured that we have their backs," says Schneider, a former Como Zoo keeper who leapt at the chance to return to campus this summer after making a career shift into special education. From managing inhalers and EpiPens, to asking parents for their best advice for helping kids on the autism spectrum adjust to new routines, Schneider's multi-layered position is equal parts educator, counselor, school nurse, and resident problem-solver, supporting Como's summer camp instructors by tending to kids who may need more time and attention from a trusted adult.



animal figurines and play stations, kids are showing their parents how they want to play and learn.”

Improving access for kids with sensory differences is also part of the plan. Once a month, Como opens an hour early for Sensory Friendly Mornings, allowing youth with autism, anxiety, ADHD, and other conditions and their families extra time to explore Como without the crowds. The current program also includes a social narrative that gives families an idea of what to expect on their visit, and Como is partnering with AuSM and Fraser to implement even more sensory-friendly modifications and strategies. For the deaf and hard of hearing, an engaging and kid-friendly American Sign Language interpreter supports the story-time portion of Little Explorers every Thursday, and travels across the Zoo and Conservatory to interpret public talks throughout the day.

With growing demand for Como’s summer camps, Como Friends and Como Park Zoo & Conservatory also combined forces to continue improving the camp experience, and to make it more accessible for more families. This spring, Como Friends expanded its commitment to summer camp scholarships by more than 50 percent, funding that made it possible to provide a week-long Camp Como experience to about 50 elementary-age campers. At the same time, Como tested out a new staffing model, recruiting veteran classroom teachers to apply for short three- to six-week terms within the seasonal summer camp program. “In the past, we hired college students who were looking for classroom experience,” Hanes says, “but by hiring professional teachers who want a fun summer gig, we’re also getting the benefit of their experience and their great classroom management skills.”

Back-to-School Partnerships

Now that school is back in session, Como’s education department is turning its attention to expanding school partnerships. After a successful pilot program last winter, Como’s popular Residency Program will fire up this fall, offering on-site experiences for third grade classrooms around the Twin Cities, and off-site programs for third graders across the state.



Made possible with funding from Minnesota’s Legacy Amendment, the free on-site program provides for both transportation costs to Como and a multi-day, multi-disciplinary curriculum where Como’s animals and plants become the backdrop for arts, language, and science learning, as well as early experiences with nature. “Even though local schools participate in Residency, many students have never been to Como before,” says Residency Education Specialist Katie Raeker, “That’s why we find ways to not only connect students to nature, but also to Como’s unique and lovable plants and animals. It’s really fun to show them around and to see their faces the first time they see a giraffe, or watch a sea lion swimming in the water.”

To reach outstate classrooms, the Residency Program hits the road, allowing a Como residency specialist to relocate for a week in Greater Minnesota, with a carload of conservation topics, art projects, and other activities for third grade classrooms. Following a pilot season that traveled to such communities as Grand Rapids, Melrose, Hinckley, and Faribault, the program got strong marks from participating classroom teachers. “One thing we’re hearing is that they really appreciate our multi-modal approach with our curriculum,” says Residency Coordinator Madeline McCullough. “There’s movement throughout the day, videos and slideshows, class discussions, and very tactile experiences with biofacts and plants. The

“Now with more manipulative things like animal figurines and play stations, kids are showing their parents how they want to play and learn.” -Erin Dimond, Education Specialist

