



como friends
THRIVE ON

Winter 2024 | Volume 26 | Number 1

INSIDER

Meeting Nature
by Name

*Personalizing nature is one
of the first steps in protecting it*

Photo by Susannah Baudhuin

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COMO PARK ZOO & CONSERVATORY

Winter Hours: (October 1 – March 31) 10 am – 4 pm
Summer Hours: (April 1 – September 30) 10 am – 6 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 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

Art Direction & Design: Susannah Baudhuin
Editor: Laura Billings Coleman | **Printing:** Dolan Printing

COMO NEWS & EVENTS



COMO FRIENDS REACHES \$50 MILLION MILESTONE

Thanks to your generous support in 2023, Como Friends reached a major philanthropic milestone, contributing more than \$50 million to Como Park Zoo & Conservatory since our start in 2000. Created by the merger of four nonprofit organizations that previously supported the zoo and conservatory, Como Friends has grown into a powerful force for preserving and protecting the community

treasure we have in Como. From major capital improvements like the Visitor Center, Polar Bear Odyssey, The Ordway Gardens and Como Harbor, to program support that has helped turn Como into the state's leading conservation classroom, Como Friends' funding has helped transform Minnesota's most visited cultural institution while protecting free admission for all.

Watch your inbox for more information as we celebrate together this accomplishment in support of Como Park Zoo & Conservatory!



YOUR SUPPORT HELPS COMO THRIVE

Thanks to our community of supporters, Como Friends was able to invest more than **\$1.86 million in programs, improvements and professional equipment** at Como Park Zoo & Conservatory in 2023. From onsite X-ray machines that improve veterinary care, to updates to sound and lighting in the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory that better feature its beautiful gardens, to a rainforest retreat in Tropical Encounters for Chloe the sloth, your generous support makes more possible at Minnesota's most visited cultural destination.

And with your generous support, Como Park Zoo & Conservatory provides free access 365 days a year for all. **Thank you for all you do to help Como thrive!**

LEAVE A LEGACY

A Minnesota tradition for more than 125 years, coming to Como Park Zoo & Conservatory is a memory that connects across generations. Help keep this legacy thriving by making a planned gift to support the wild and precious plants and animals that inspire us, and to safeguard the free admission visitors count on.

Open every day of the year, Como provides community members access to the natural world. By including Como in your estate plan, you help keep this community treasure available to all for years to come.

For more information on planned giving, contact **Laurel Lundberg**, director of individual giving at laurel.lundberg@comofriends.org | 651-487-8296.



BUY YOUR TICKETS TO BOUQUETS BEFORE THEY'RE GONE!

February 22, 2024, from 7:00 pm - 9:30 pm

Come in from the cold and feel your senses unfurl in the balmy beauty of Bouquets, an after-hours benefit for Como Park Zoo & Conservatory. Plan a unique mid-winter date night at this exceptional evening of wine, beer, food, and fun—all to benefit Como Park Zoo & Conservatory, Minnesota's most visited cultural institution.

Are you looking to add more Como to your evening at Bouquets? Take a tranquil moment away from the

bustle of Bouquets and join us in the Berglund Room where you'll be inspired by the living art of bonsai. Ask Como's horticulturists how they cultivate and care for the largest public bonsai collection in the Upper Midwest and view some of Como's exceptional specimen trees. At this engaging experience, experts will be on hand to demonstrate their skills and artistry, share bonsai tips, show the tools of the trade, and unlock the mystery of this ancient art form.

Reserve your tickets today at comofriends.org!

SAVE THE DATE FOR MORE ENGAGING EVENTS!

Como Quest Saturday, May 4 9:00 am – 11:30 am	Wild Conservation (21+) Tuesday, May 14 6:30 pm – 8:30 pm	Sunset Affair Thursday, July 18 5:30 pm – 10:00 pm
Como Quest is a wild exploration designed for multigenerational fun. Put together your team and come on an unforgettable adventure at Minnesota's most visited conservation destination!	This fun-filled evening in support of Como Park Zoo & Conservatory is geared towards adults 21+ who love Como and want to explore without the crowds or the kids.	A hot ticket for one of the coolest causes in town, Como Friends' Sunset Affair gala is a great way to get to know more about what makes Como Park Zoo & Conservatory so special.



OUT IN THE COLD

Como Zoo's Ruby is a new animal ambassador for Minnesota's growing herd of wild bison



Given the choice, many animals at Como Zoo like to avoid winter weather in the relative comfort of the indoors. But three animals that almost never come in from the cold are Aunt Bea, Boggo, and Ruby, who now share the expanded bison habitat at Como's historic barn.

"Bison are super well adapted to life on the prairie and they can handle any kind of winter weather," says keeper Adam Nigon (shown bottom left page). "They use their heads like a big snowplow to carve through the snow and get at the grass underneath, and unlike other animals, they actually face into the blowing wind. One of the coolest things about bison is that their winter coats are so well insulated that snow doesn't melt off of their backs at all because their body heat just doesn't escape."

Nigon has new appreciation for one of North America's most iconic animals after spending time as a volunteer with the Minnesota Bison Conservation Herd, a joint project of the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and the Minnesota Zoological Garden. With managed bison herds that live at Blue Mounds State Park, Minneopa State Park, and the newest bison prairie at Dakota County's Spring Lake Park Reserve, the initiative is geared toward growing a herd of 500 animals with diverse genetics similar to that of historic wild bison.

With the support of Como Friends' Conservation Champions program, Nigon was able to take part in the annual bison management day at Blue Mounds State Park, during which nearly 100 animals were vaccinated and tested for cattle mitochondrial DNA, a common result of crossbreeding in the livestock business. The Minnesota Bison Conservation

Herd has tested free of cattle genes, meaning that the bison the public can now see at these state parks are nearly identical to the herds that roamed the prairies more than 200 years ago.

Ruby, Como Zoo's new yearling bison, is one of the project's offspring—a 700-pound animal ambassador for the critical conservation efforts to protect bison and rebuild healthy prairie habitats. While no breeding will take place at Como Zoo, Ruby's arrival gives keepers like Nigon the chance to talk about the value of protecting the wild genetics of North America's largest mammal.

"The reason this work is so important is that bison are a keystone species in the prairie ecosystem," Nigon says. While controlled burns, haying, and other agricultural practices can help create healthy prairies, he says, "none of those things are really as effective as having the bison on the ground doing that work. They munch the grass, and clear areas so that more flowers and other plants can take root. In their wallows, they make depressions in the ground that collect water and are great for other animals. And with their heavy coats, they're spreading seeds and pollinating plants as they move across the landscape. By preserving and creating habitat for numerous other species that share the same landscape, they really do play a big role in the healthy ecosystem of this state."

Your support for Como Friends' Conservation Champions program helps keepers, horticulturists and educators to share their expertise with conservation efforts in the field, while bringing back experiences that enrich Como's education efforts and healthy habitats. Thank you!

Now through March 17, the Winter Flower Show is fragrant with flowering trees and shrubs, including purple azaleas, tropical hibiscus, gardenias, and purple and white cyclamen.



MORE SECRETS FROM THE SUNKEN GARDEN

*The Marjorie McNeely Conservatory's busiest room
is also its most breathtaking*

By the numbers: Packed with more plant material per square inch than any other corner of Como, the Sunken Garden is one of the most labor-intensive collections, with multiple designers, four dedicated crop horticulturists, flower crops that have to be replaced regularly, and more than a dozen community volunteers who come in daily to keep the display perfectly groomed. Behind the scenes, crops destined for the Sunken Garden fill up to half of Como's available growing space. For 2023's Holiday Flower Show, horticulturist Bo Akinkuotu grew nearly 1,500 individual Poinsettias for the month-long display, and has planted nearly 10 times that many bulbs, plugs, and plants for the Spring Flower Show coming March 22 through April 28, 2024.

Evolving design: While the planning for each show begins more than a year in advance with a detailed plant list and design map, horticultural supervisor Ariel Dressler says the final staging evolves right until the show's unveiling. "There's a lot of flexibility during the installation process, and the advantage of having so many creative staff members and volunteers is that they always make things better than the original plan," she says. Thanks to your contributions to Como Friends, the Sunken Garden is home to one of the last and largest rotating botanical shows that's always free to visitors. "This room is always changing,

so if a particular flower show isn't your favorite, just wait two months and the whole place will be completely transformed," says Dressler.

Sustainable practices: Conservation is Como's mission, even in the Sunken Garden. "As often as we can, we want to give the plants and trees we use in the Sunken Garden a second life somewhere on campus, or in the community," says Como's horticultural curator, Dr. Lisa Philander. For years, spring bulbs pulled from the Sunken Garden have been recycled and resold through Como Friends' Garden Safari Gifts, with proceeds that help pay for next year's bulb show. Your contributions to Como Friends are also helping the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory start a new on-site compost system with the capacity to turn tons of spent plant material into rich compost for future flower shows and gardens.

A natural gathering place: The venue for Como's popular Music Under Glass winter concert series—not to mention hundreds of weddings—the Sunken Garden has been a natural gathering place for the community for nearly a century. A recent Como Friends grant is funding the installation of new screen windows to block the access of raccoons and other critters that enjoy nibbling on the plants in the Sunken Garden.

Shown above: Rylee Werden, horticulturist; Ariel Dressler, horticulture supervisor and Dr. Lisa Philander, horticulture curator.

MEETING NATURE BY NAME

Personalizing nature is one of the first steps in protecting it



Shown above: Zookeeper Brooke, Chloe, Como's Hoffmann's two-toed sloth, and Bouquets guests.

Shown right: Young guest and Virgil, Como's western lowland gorilla; Bekah Hanes and Kelsey Raffel; Kelley Fike and Frank Kermes from Como's Visitor Services.



Sparky, Neil, Chloe, and Schroeder are just a few of the Como Park Zoo & Conservatory animals known to millions of visitors by their first names. Though there was once a time when zoos shied away from showcasing the individual animals in their care, a growing body of research now tells us that encouraging the public to forge personal connections to nature is one of the best ways to protect it.

That thinking is the driving force behind a series of new education and engagement strategies now in effect at Como Park Zoo & Conservatory, thanks to support from Advancing Conservation through Empathy (ACE) for Wildlife, a learning network of AZA-accredited zoos, aquariums, and other institutions exploring effective practices for fostering empathy for animals. *"The old theory was that simply sharing knowledge would be enough to inspire action, but what we're coming to realize is that fostering meaningful emotional connections is just as important. Having empathy for an animal builds the desire to act on their behalf,"* says Bekah Hanes, Como's education and conservation curator. *"Empathy is a skill you can develop and build on, and it's becoming an important tool to help people cross the finish line from thinking about conservation to actually acting out those values, long after a zoo visit is over."*

The official shift toward empathy-focused engagement started in 2016, when Como Friends secured a major grant to help Como Park Zoo & Conservatory implement a new education and engagement strategy called the ROADMAP (Reaching Our Audiences by Developing Mission Aligned Programs). While the pandemic put a pause on public education programs for a time, Como continued to move ahead with its mission, securing grants from ACE for Wildlife

to rewrite Como's volunteer interpretive programs with an empathy focus, to use empathy as the lens for a new education strategic plan, and to create new permanent signage in the wolves and large cats habitat that uses empathy-inspiring language. While Como is one of the inaugural members of the ACE for Wildlife Learning Network, a special project of Seattle's Woodland Park Zoo, the empathy movement is gaining ground with many other AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums.

Public Engagement Coordinator Kelsey Raffel says *"it's a great shift that's happened in a relatively short amount of time," in part because it embodies an approach toward audience engagement that Como's keepers, horticulturists, interpreters, and educators gravitate toward naturally. "Focusing on empathy in our education programs, volunteer training, and visitor engagement has gotten a great reception from the campus,"* she says. *"For instance, our interpretive staff have shared that they love talking about the individual animals we care for, their personalities and likes and dislikes, and this approach really encourages them to do that."*

Jackie Sticha, president of Como Friends, says community support is critical to providing the resources Como Park Zoo & Conservatory needs to stay current as a conservation educator and a national leader in animal care. *"More than 20 years ago, Como Friends funding helped Como Zoo make a shift toward positive reinforcement training for animals, and we see this empathy work as part of that same evolution,"* she says. *"It's just natural to want to know the names of the animals at Como Zoo, and now the research tells us it's also a really powerful way of connecting visitors to the natural world."*



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Locations: in the Visitor Center
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A Curated Collection of Local Favorites

From recycled wooden notebooks made by St. Paul's Wood-chuck USA, to hand-thrown mugs from Deneen Pottery, Garden Safari Gifts is full of thoughtfully curated gifts that celebrate Minnesota's unique character, from the lakes to the prairies. Every purchase at Como Friends' gift shop helps to support the animals and plants you love, from bison to bromeliads. **Como Friends members enjoy 15 percent off every purchase.**

