



como friends  
THRIVE ON

Winter 2026 | Volume 28 | Number 1

# INSIDER

## Love in a Cold Climate

*Astra the polar bear's recent arrival at Como Zoo is part of an international effort to increase breeding success for this vulnerable species*

Photo by Susannah Baudhuin

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## HOW TO REACH US

Como Friends:	651.487.8229
Membership & Donations:	651.487.8229
Como Friends Gift Shop:	651.487.8222
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Como Park Zoo & Conservatory Information:	651.487.8200
Visitor Services:	651.487.8201
Education Department:	651.487.8272
Volunteer Services:	651.487.8252
Rentals:	651.487.8250

### COMO PARK ZOO & CONSERVATORY

SUMMER HOURS: (May 1 – September 7) 10 am – 6 pm  
WINTER HOURS: (September 8 – April 30) 10 am – 4 pm



1225 Estabrook Drive | St. Paul, MN 55103 | 651.487.8229  
comofriends.org | comomembership@comofriends.org



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.



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#### COMO FRIENDS INSIDER

ART DIRECTION & DESIGN: Susannah Baudhuin  
EDITOR: Laura Billings Coleman | PRINTING: Dolan Printing

## COMO NEWS & EVENTS



**DON'T GET LEFT IN THE COLD:  
BUY YOUR BOUQUETS TICKETS TODAY**

Thursday, February 26, 2026 | 7:00 PM – 9:30 PM

With wine, beverage, and food tastings arrayed throughout Como's Visitor Center and the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory, no benefit in the Twin Cities has a more beautiful backdrop than Como Friends' Bouquets, coming February 26. With tickets selling fast, now's the time to take advantage of your \$5 member discount on general admission to Como Friends' most spirited fundraiser.

Visit [comofriends.org](http://comofriends.org) or call 651-487-8229 and make a date for this mid-winter celebration of Minnesota's most beloved cultural institution.

#### THANK YOU TO OUR SPONSORS & PARTNERS



### A SWEETHEART DEAL FOR ANIMAL LOVERS

Show you care this Valentine's season with a very special delivery for the animal lovers in your life! Get your Animal Sponsorship sweetheart deal on this adorable trio of sloth, flamingo, or polar bear mini-plush—plus a Valentine's card and gluten-free candy—for only \$25. A great gift for nature lovers of all ages, you can sweeten the deal with two for just \$45, or three for \$65.

Please note, **Sunday, February 8** is the last day to order online for Valentine's delivery.





## THANK YOU FOR ALL YOU DO FOR COMO!

Whether it's making summer camp more affordable for young families, or stocking the sweet potatoes Como's polar bears love to snack on, your support helped Como Park Zoo & Conservatory do even more for animals, plants, and people in 2025. Gifts of all sizes helped Como Friends to invest more than \$3 million in Minnesota's most visited cultural desti-

nation, elevating animal care, growing gorgeous plants, flowers, and gardens, and connecting the next generation to the wonders of nature through great programs like our new 4th grade field trip partnership with St. Paul Public Schools. Thank you for all you do to help Como be the best it can be today, and even better tomorrow!



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

For more than five generations, Como Park Zoo & Conservatory has been a gift that keeps on giving. Help us serve the next generation by including Como Friends in your estate plan. From the free admission that introduces nearly two million visitors a year to the wonders of nature, to the family-friendly programs that teach us how to care for the earth's animals and plants, gifts of all sizes can help support our mission for years to come.

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



## MARK YOUR COMO CALENDAR



JAN

### JANUARY 4–FEBRUARY 4 | MUSIC UNDER GLASS

Music Under Glass is back this season, with free after-hours concerts set in the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory's Sunken Garden on select Sundays and Wednesdays. Check out this season's schedule at Como's special events page to find performance dates for local favorites including Switchgrass and Annie Mack.

### SATURDAY AND SUNDAY, JANUARY 24–25 | WINTER CARNIVAL ORCHID SHOW

The annual Saint Paul Winter Carnival Orchid Show is the only time of the year when tickets are required for visitors to enter the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory. Make your timed reservation today to see the exotic species and beautiful displays cultivated and created by members of the Orchid Society of Minnesota and the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory's talented team of horticulturists. Buy your tickets at [comozooconservatory.org](http://comozooconservatory.org).

### SUNDAY, JANUARY 25 | COMO FRIENDS SPECIAL ACCESS EVENT: WINTER CARNIVAL ORCHID SHOW

The Saint Paul Winter Carnival Orchid Show transforms the Conservatory into a breathtaking oasis filled with hundreds of exquisite orchids! Wander through stunning displays, where the vivid colors and delicate beauty of orchids transport you far from the icy grip of Minnesota winter. Supporters can sign up to attend free Special Access events on our website, by calling 651-487-8229, or by emailing [comomembership@comofriends.org](mailto:comomembership@comofriends.org).

FEB

### SATURDAY AND SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 21-22 | WADDLE INTO ACTION WEEKEND: HELP SAVE THE AFRICAN PENGUIN

Learn more about our African penguins here at Como Zoo, and what you can do to help their critically endangered wild counterparts at this Education and Conservation Weekend.

### THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 26 | BOUQUETS

Join us for Bouquets, an after-hours benefit for Como Park Zoo & Conservatory in support of the plants, animals, and free access you love at Como! With wine, beverage, and food tastings arrayed throughout the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory, it's a great date night idea to break up the mid-winter blahs. Tickets are going fast! Purchase your tickets in the Gift Shop or at [comofriends.org](http://comofriends.org).

MAR

### FRIDAY, MARCH 20 | SPRING FLOWER SHOW OPENS

The Marjorie McNeely Conservatory's Spring Flower Show is a beloved Twin Cities rite of spring. The show features two distinct displays, with the second opening on May 1. After each phase, bulbs from the display will be available for purchase at the Como Friends Gift Shop.

APR

### SATURDAY AND SUNDAY, APRIL 25-26 | PARTY FOR THE PLANET, POWERED BY XCEL ENERGY

Celebrate Earth Day 2026 at Como Park Zoo & Conservatory during Party for the Planet, a two-day, all-ages weekend event. Powered by Xcel Energy, the weekend highlights the transition to renewable energy through family-friendly activities and engaging programs offering fun, hands-on ways to learn how to care for our planet on Earth Day and beyond.

MAY

### TUESDAY, MAY 19 | COMO AFTER HOURS

See Como in a whole new light—without the crowds or kids! Kick off the start of spring at Como Friends' adults-only fundraiser, a casual night of grown-up fun for a great cause. Visit [comofriends.org](http://comofriends.org) to learn more.

### SATURDAY, MAY 30 | COMO FRIENDS SPECIAL ACCESS BLAZE SPARKY SHOW

Dive into summer at our supporter-only Blaze Sparky Show at 9 a.m., and meet the playful pinnipeds of Como Harbor. Supporters can sign up to attend free Special Access events on our website, by calling 651-487-8229, or by emailing [comomembership@comofriends.org](mailto:comomembership@comofriends.org).

**Also starting the second Monday in March, the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory will be open till 6:00 p.m. on Monday evenings so we can all enjoy the gardens a little longer.**

**Remember to sign up for our monthly Como Promo E-newsletter at [comofriends.org](http://comofriends.org), and follow us on social media for the most up-to-date information!**

# MEET COMO'S NEW CAMPUS DIRECTOR ERICA PROSSER

**D**eputy Parks Director Erica Prosser was filling in as Como's interim director last summer when the city of Saint Paul's computer systems were hit by a disabling cyberattack. "Being new here, I immediately flashed on 'Jurassic Park' and imagined all the animals just wandering away," she says. "The staff reassured me that can't happen, thank goodness, but this is a job that comes with many surprises."

Since her official appointment to the role this fall, Prosser has made fast work of learning the ropes at Minnesota's most visited cultural destination, overseeing everything from cross-country polar bear transfers to a comprehensive new strategic plan for conservation. "I feel like every day on this job is different, with new things to learn all the time," she says. "Do the orangutans have their flu shots? How many school buses just pulled in for field trips? Do we have room for a few hundred new carnivorous plants? Some days it can be a little crazy, but I guess that's why it's called a zoo."

Prosser's appointment is the latest in a generational leadership succession that's taken place at Como over the last two years starting with the arrival of Wes Sims, director of animal care and health at Como Zoo, Ray Watson, the new horticultural curator at the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory, and Katie Hill, Como Friends' new president. "It's been such an exciting time to be at Como, and for all of us to have the opportunity to build on the vision of long-time campus leaders who served in these roles for decades, bringing incredible stability, expertise, and care to this work," says Hill. "Now with Erica, who brings so much excitement and positivity to this work, there's really something special happening here in terms of the energy and optimism about Como's future."

Prosser recently sat down with Como Friends to talk about what it's like to be responsible for Como Park Zoo & Conservatory, where more than 1,000 animals and nearly two million annual visitors cross paths every day.

## *Did you come to Como as a kid?*

I lived in Chicago until I was in sixth grade, so the Brookfield Zoo and Lincoln Park Zoo were my childhood zoos. I'm afraid it's not a great story, but the first time I came to Como on a field trip, I cried the whole bus ride home be-

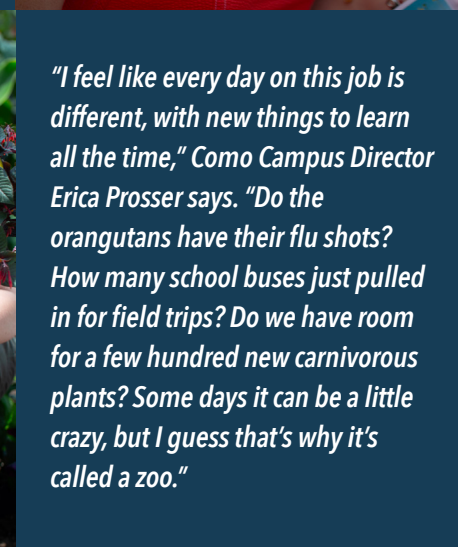
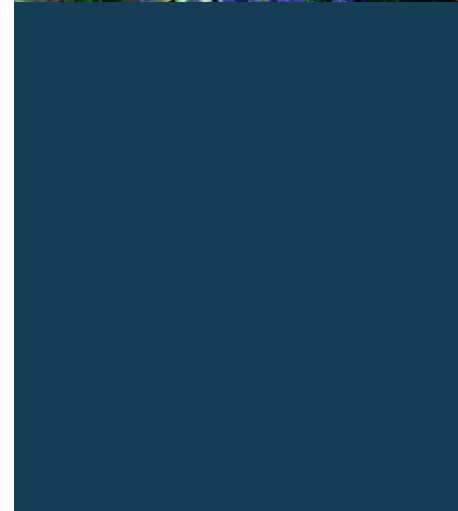
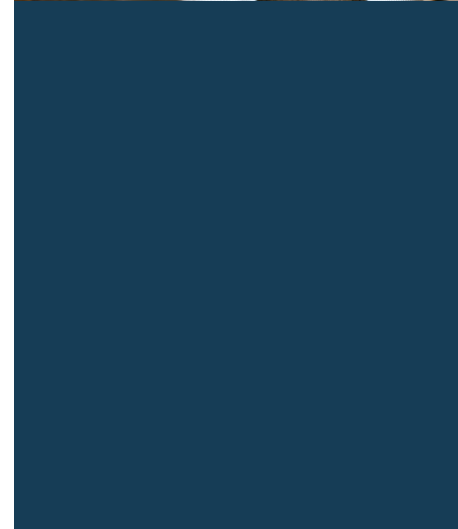
cause I was upset about the polar bear, doing that repetitive swimming. Of course, many years later, when I came back as a parent with my two kids, Como had become a completely different place with a state-of-the-art habitat in Polar Bear Odyssey, and exceptional keepers like Allison Jungheim, the polar bear studbook keeper, who is recognized as an expert in humane polar bear care. These major improvements have elevated animal care to such an extent that Como has become a valuable education destination, teaching the public about conservation, and now even helping to sustain vulnerable species like polar bears, and doing everything we can to help protect them in the future.

## *You've worked in a variety of government roles, in the Minneapolis mayor's office, the Minneapolis Fire Department, and as a Metropolitan Airports commissioner. How did you find your way into the St. Paul parks, and why does this work excite you?*

I would say that my personal mission in my work has been about promoting equity and removing systemic racism, and so one of the things I loved about the parks and my job as deputy director has been overseeing the Right Track program, which has become a pipeline for career development opportunities for youth from cost-burdened households in St. Paul. Here at Como, we've created a new apprentice program that's creating paid work opportunities in zookeeping and horticulture for young people who might not be able to afford taking on an unpaid internship. I'm really passionate about youth and workforce development, and the parks are a great place to support both.

## *Your coworkers have noticed that you've been creating an impressive botanical collection in your office. Is the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory inspiring you?*

Absolutely! I love looking into the greenhouses and seeing all of these growing things. One of the most memorable and meaningful things about Como is coming to the Conservatory with a family member who was suffer-



*"I feel like every day on this job is different, with new things to learn all the time," Como Campus Director Erica Prosser says. "Do the orangutans have their flu shots? How many school buses just pulled in for field trips? Do we have room for a few hundred new carnivorous plants? Some days it can be a little crazy, but I guess that's why it's called a zoo."*

ing from severe depression. We made it a regular thing for a while, coming to visit all these green living things, feeling the humidity, and taking in all of the good smells in the Sunken Garden, in the Palm Dome. It became part of a healing journey, and that's why the Conservatory has a very special place in my heart. I think it does for a lot of people.

## *What discoveries about Como have surprised you the most since you started this job?*

Seeing people stand in line for hours when Frederick the corpse flower was blooming was a big surprise. It taught me that not only do our animals have personalities, but the plants have personalities, too—and fan clubs!

Another big learning experience for me was when Sago, a Hoffmann's two-toed sloth, gave birth right on exhibit. That's when I found out there's no urine pregnancy test for sloths, so guests were the first ones to see it, record it, and post it so it went viral. We leaned into it because the whole thing was really cool, but a few weeks later, the baby died, and it was just heartbreaking. The circle of life is real in a zoo, and when an animal like Clover the giraffe dies, the impact is enormous. These animals are like long-time coworkers to our zookeepers, and they've often been caring for them even longer than their own children. These are huge losses.

## *What are you looking forward to for Como?*

Creating a new campus plan to guide improvements and programs for the future. Our infrastructure is aging while animal care standards are only increasing, so I'm really looking forward to imagining and designing what this place could look like and feel like in the future. I'm also really excited about working with Katie Hill, Como Friends' new president, who also loves to brainstorm. With the work we've done creating the education strategic plan and the conservation strategic plan, it feels like we have all of the layers in place to do this work really well.

# LOVE IN A COLD CLIMATE

Astra the polar bear's recent arrival at Como Zoo is part of an international effort to increase breeding success for this vulnerable species

**W**hen new animals arrive at Como Zoo, they typically meet their assigned roommates through a process zookeepers call a "howdy"—a chance to see, hear, and smell the resident animals on the other side of a steel mesh barrier. The initial step before a full-on introduction, these first impressions can give keepers important clues about how animals on both sides of the mesh might be feeling about the meeting.

But when Como Zoo's two youngest polar bears, Astra and Kulu, had their first howdy this fall, their behavior made it clear they were eager to get even closer. "They seemed to be really wanting to play together," says aquatics keeper Kelley Dinsmore, who is part of a behind-the-scenes team that's been watching the bears' every move since five-year-old Astra's arrival in October from Tacoma's Point Defiance Zoo. "They'd be laying at the howdy doors near each other, and trying to pass toys through the mesh, so we had a very good feeling that we could just go ahead and introduce these two, since they seemed to want to be near each other."

In the weeks since their introduction, the bond between Astra and Kulu seems to have grown. Since their first romp through Polar Bear Odyssey, the pair can often be seen chasing each other around the habitat, and taking turns bellyflopping into the deep pool. Paired for the first time with a polar bear his own age, Kulu is especially playful and will sometimes block Astra's entry to her bedroom just to keep the party going. "When Astra could use a break, he's not great at picking up on that cue," Senior Keeper Allison Jungheim says.

Photos of Kulu and Astra snuggling in their den taken by Zookeepers  
Melanie Hart and Julie Yarrington



When zookeepers threw them a combined birthday party in late November, Astra (born November 17) and six-year-old Kulu (born November 28) even managed to share a cake. Jungheim says, "We're amazed by how well they're getting along. The fact that they are able to eat nicely together was a big surprise."

All of this behavior bodes well for the future success of this new breeding pair, the first such union in Como Zoo's history. "Will love be in the air?" Jungheim wonders. "We are really hoping so."

## A NATIONAL LEADER IN POLAR BEAR CARE

Jungheim speaks not only for the Como Zoo aquatics keepers who've been anticipating this match for months, but also for an international network of conservation experts exploring new ways to boost the population of polar bears. For the last decade, births among the 37 polar bears now in U.S. zoos have been lagging, with about 1.5 cubs born each season. It's not enough to sustain the aging population, where 16 are now over the age of 20—including Como's Neil, 30, and Nan, 31, two of the oldest polar bears in North America.

It's a population that Jungheim knows well in her role as program leader and studbook keeper for North America's polar bears, where she tracks the genetic health and history of 56 individuals living in partner zoos across Canada and the U.S. A project of the Bear Taxon Advisory Group through the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA), the studbook is one of the ways that zoos work together to ensure that managed populations of polar bears are living their best lives. Another is the new Polar Bear Population Alliance (PBPA), a collaborative network launched last November that's been making new breeding recommendations across the country, including the new match between Astra and Kulu.

"The Polar Bear Population Alliance is working to make sure that polar bears are going to be here in the future by increasing the number of polar bear cubs born annually to achieve a sustainable population," says Jungheim, who is both a founding member of the PBPA and serves on its Polar Bear Management Group (PBMG). One of the group's first priorities is to move reproductive-age females like Astra into optimal breeding spaces like Polar Bear Odyssey. The next is to create additional pairings with other females, preferably with one male for every two females.

"The hope is that having two females will create competition, and get these bears going reproductively forward when breeding season comes around late winter," she says. "Polar bears that have been housed together during the summer have proven to be more successful, while bears that have a history of contraception—a common practice when the polar bear population was larger—have been less successful."

While data points like that are helping to determine where the zoo population's reproductive bears should move in the months ahead, there's no guarantee that every pairing will be successful. Not only do polar bears reproduce through delayed implantation, new cubs also have a 50 percent mortality rate during their first year. Even so, Como's keepers are encouraged by the positive and playful behavior they're observing from Astra and Kulu.

"It may take these two young, innocent bears a little bit of time to get it right. We're really hopeful that when breeding season comes around in February, that hormones take over and they figure it all out." Jungheim says. "Nature always finds a way."



## AGING with GRACE

While visitors can't take their eyes off Como Zoo's two youngest polar bears, Como's aquatics keepers are paying special attention to Nan and Neil, two of the oldest polar bears in North America. At age 31 and 30, respectively, the two elder bears are keeping to their half of Polar Bear Odyssey for the time being.

**"Our goal is to keep them both as comfortable and happy as possible," says Jungheim. For Neil, that means a weekly IV injection of joint medication, usually given to him after his training time with keepers. For Nan, it means easy access to her behind-the-scenes bedroom. "We're giving her the opportunity to go to her den and take naps as long as she wants."**

Providing specialized care for geriatric animals is a constant in the zoo world, where animals can often outlive their wild cousins by years or even decades. For instance, at age 34, Como's oldest penguin, B.J., has lived nearly

twice as many years as wild penguins typically do. At age 12, Stella the arctic fox has lived more than five times as long as most of her wild cousins. At age 23, Ulysses the zebra, who passed away last fall, had become the second-oldest plains zebra in the AZA population.

Senior Keeper Jill Erzar says that making sure zoo animals are living their best lives during those extra years is critical. For instance, orangutan Jambu and gorilla Schroeder, both 40 years old, have been taking joint supplements for a few years to help them stay fit and flexible. "As animals age, we also monitor their weights even more closely, especially when they start losing muscle mass," Erzar says. "We also pay close attention to changes in appetite, routine, and eyesight that can signal the need for more specialized care."

**Having a deeper understanding of an animal's natural lifespan can also help keepers make more compassionate choices about medical care. For instance, Mumford the lion, who turns 10 in January, is now at the far end of the typical eight-to-ten-year lifespan for male lions in the wild. Recently diagnosed with an untreatable tumor within his nasal sinuses, the lion's advanced age was one of many factors that figured into the decision to provide comforting hospice care for Mumford in the months ahead. "After thoughtful discussions with our veterinary team and consulting specialists, we made the compassionate decision to focus on his comfort and quality of life rather than treatments that could cause more harm than good," says Erzar. "His devoted keepers are with him every day, making sure he's comfortable and still enjoying his time with Maji, doing all his favorite 'Mumford things.' His wellbeing remains our highest priority."**

Support from Como Friends has helped provide growing resources for Mumford and the rest of Como's geriatric animal population, including a new portable anesthesia



machine and a "Bair Hugger" forced-air warming system that helps maintain an animal's core body temperature. More than 25 years ago, the nonprofit also provided the initial funding to support the operant conditioning training program that encourages animals to participate in their own health care.

While it can be hard to watch beloved animals succumb to old age and chronic disease, Erzar says the close relationships keepers build with animals over the years can provide comfort. "There are more health challenges as animals get older, but we also know them better, and know how they're likely to react," she says. "We know what they've been up against, we've seen what kind of resilience they have, and how they're going to handle a visit from the veterinarian. We're able to provide that extra care they need because we have a stronger relationship with them the older they get."



## MEET KHOMAS and KEANU, Como Zoo's New HARTMANN'S MOUNTAIN ZEBRAS

Native to the high-altitude regions of Namibia and Angola, Hartmann's mountain zebras are a hearty species, accustomed to colder temperatures, climbing, and digging deep to uncover hidden water in their arid habitat. That means Minnesota's cold weather may be just fine with Khomas and Keanu, a father and son zebra pair recently arrived from Boston's Franklin Park Zoo. "Because they're accustomed to colder weather, we may see them staying outdoors a little longer as the colder weather arrives," says Wes Sims, Director of Animal Care and Health at Como Zoo. Slightly taller than plains zebras like Como Zoo's late Ulysses, Hartmann's mountain zebras have a different stripe pattern, and a dewlap on their necks.





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Saint Paul, MN 55103

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and throughout  
Como Park Zoo & Conservatory

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[comofriends.org](http://comofriends.org)



### *Cold Noses, Warm Hearts at the Como Friends Gift Shop*

This winter, the Como Friends Gift Shop is celebrating the Arctic inhabitants of Polar Bear Odyssey with one-of-a-kind gifts inspired by our four beloved polar bears. From cozy shirts and sweatshirts, to drinkware, hats, and polar bear-themed keepsakes, every purchase helps support great animal care and conservation efforts at Como Park Zoo & Conservatory. **Remember, Como Friends members enjoy 15 percent off every purchase!**

