Zoo to You column for Garden City Telegram

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Topic: Staying Cool During the Heat

 The Zoo is a "hot" place to be. Not just because it's fun but also because, let's face it, it's summertime in Kansas and it's hot out there. Many guests ask what we do to keep the resident animals cool during the heat. The simple answer is: everything we can think of to keep them comfortable.

Let's start off with the basics: water to drink and shade. All the zoo animals have drinking water at all times, unless they're on water restrictions due to a veterinary procedure, but that's a topic for another time. Sometimes, in order to make the habitat look more natural, staff may hide the rubber, plastic, or metal water bowls from public view. Rest assured, whether you can see it or not, the animals always have drinking water, and that's especially important when it's hot.

All habitats have shade, whether provided by trees, caves, log hollows, tall grasses, or shade tarps or structures that have been constructed in the area. The various shade tarps come down during the winter but once temperatures start to signal summer is close, the animal care and maintenance teams are right there working to put them up for the comfort of the animals as quick as they can. There are also instances when staff offer additional shady areas by giving the residents access to their inside quarters. While this may take the animal out of view of our guests periodically, it's for the health of the animal involved. Zoo guests who are also "enjoying the heat" know that having the chance to step inside somewhere cooler, such as the Safari Shoppe, is a needed respite at times. Some of the resident animals have air conditioning in their indoor quarters. The ones that are more sensitive to the heat, such as snow leopards and red pandas, really enjoy this during the Kansas heat.

Before giving the zoo animals access inside, staff will take steps to cool off the outdoor environment with misters and fans. Some of the habitats have pools for the animals to enjoy. We do our best to make sure these are available when it's hot. Plumbing issues and even cleaning necessities can sometimes cause pools to be empty temporarily. In those rare cases we take steps to make sure the animals have other options to help them deal with the heat.

Do you enjoy a slush or other iced beverages during the summer? Many of the residents receive enrichment items that are ice-based during times of high temperatures. How about a smeltcicle? While

it may not sound enticing to you or me, many of the animals find it very enjoyable. Some curl up next to a frozen 2 liter bottle, sort of a hot water bottle in reverse.   Zoo staff also schedule activities for the resident animals around the temperatures of the day. Unless it's an emergency, veterinary and husbandry procedures occur during the cooler temperatures of a summer day.

A great deal of thought goes into the steps taken to keep the zoo animals comfortable. Each species has their own guidelines based on what is best for them, and as the temperature goes up, we adjust our methods for keeping the animals happy and healthy. The same applies during the cold of winter. And just as you bundle up or huddle near a fire in winter to stay warm, we want you to be sure to take the necessary steps to stay cool during the summer heat.   Find shade and drink plenty of water. Don't overexert yourself, and move into the air conditioning or in front of a fan or mister when you need to do so.

Just like the resident animals at the zoo need extra thought and special care during the summer heat, so do your pets at home. Drinking water, shade, fans, misters, pools and being inside work for all of us, including Fido and Fluffy. And please remember, being left in a parked car or even the bed of a parked truck in the summer, whether the window is cracked or not, whether the vehicle is parked in the shade when you leave it or not, is not healthy for anyone, human or animal. Stay safe and enjoy your summer by being smart about the heat!