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Have you ever wanted to visit South America? If you take a look at a map of the Lee Richardson Zoo, you'll see that the areas in the zoo, and the animals that reside in them, are generally grouped by continental regions. The area closest to the entrance of the zoo is known as the African Plains, and you can see species from all over Africa such as the rhino, spurred tortoise, and addax. Wild Asia is home to another group of diverse animals all native to Asia, and the trend continues throughout the North American Plains. There is even an area called Down Under where you can find the animals who call Australia home. Last but not least, and one of my favorite areas to frequent is our South American Pampas.

Following right behind North America, South America is the fourth largest continent and covers 6,880,706 square miles and is home to over 418,537,818 people. This continent also claims the longest mountain range in the world, the Andes Mountains, stretching over 4,300 miles from Venezuela to Chile. The continent has expansive wilderness with varying climates, with the bulk of the continent located in the southern hemisphere. The Amazon River and many rainforests are just two reasons why South America is one of the most biodiverse continents on Earth. Biodiversity refers to the variety of life in a habitat, this diversity is essential for a thriving ecosystem. At the zoo, cavy, rheas, maned wolves, alpacas, flamingos and a giant anteater all represent South America right here in Garden City.

Three female cavies currently live at the zoo, a mother-daughter pair, and an aunt. Cavies are rodents and are related to rats, mice, and gophers. They can be found primarily in Argentina and spend their time traversing areas with coarse grass and shrubs. Our cavies share a habitat with a herd of alpaca. Often confused for llamas, alpacas are actually smaller than llamas and have much shorter ears. Their wool allows them to survive frigid temperatures and is shorn annually. Rheas are large flightless

birds that can reach up to fifty pounds. A male and female pair of rheas share their habitat with an anteater at the zoo. The giant anteater is known for its nearly three-foot long tail with hairs that are over 16 inches long, and for the fact that just as its name suggests, it eats ants!

Between the anteater and the alpaca, you can find the maned wolf habitat. Two brothers can be found walking on the longest legs in proportion to their spine of any animal in the canid family. This species lives a mostly solitary life and can be found throughout central South America while their zoo neighbors across the way, the Chilean flamingo, can be found in southern South America. Flamingos are known for their vibrant pink feathers and will group together in flocks of over a million birds.

Besides the wildlife, a lot of things can come to mind when thinking about South America. Personally, I think of bright lights, sunshine soaked beaches, and futbol (soccer)! I also tend to focus on the country of Brazil, which is the largest in the continent. When I think of Brazil, I can't help but imagine Rio de Janeiro, Brazil's second most populous city. Rio is home to the largest Carnival in the world, where a massive amount of choreographed groups parade through the streets wearing festive costumes, dancing, and playing music.

While the odds of me ever attending a Brazilian Carnival are slim, I am looking forward to attending an "Evening in Rio" on September 9<sup>th</sup> for the 12<sup>th</sup> annual "A Wild Affair" hosted by the Friends of Lee Richardson Zoo. The night will be a carnival in its own right, featuring a live band, food samples from the region's best restaurants and caterers, and both live and silent auctions all to benefit improvements at the zoo. Tickets are on sale now for \$40 per person or \$50 each after Labor Day. You can purchase yours at the zoo, Blue Fox Boutique, Patrick Dugan's Coffee House, Ward's Garden Center, or online at [www.folrz.org](http://www.folrz.org). Save yourself the hassle and cost of a flight to South America and enjoy an "Evening in Rio" right here at home.

