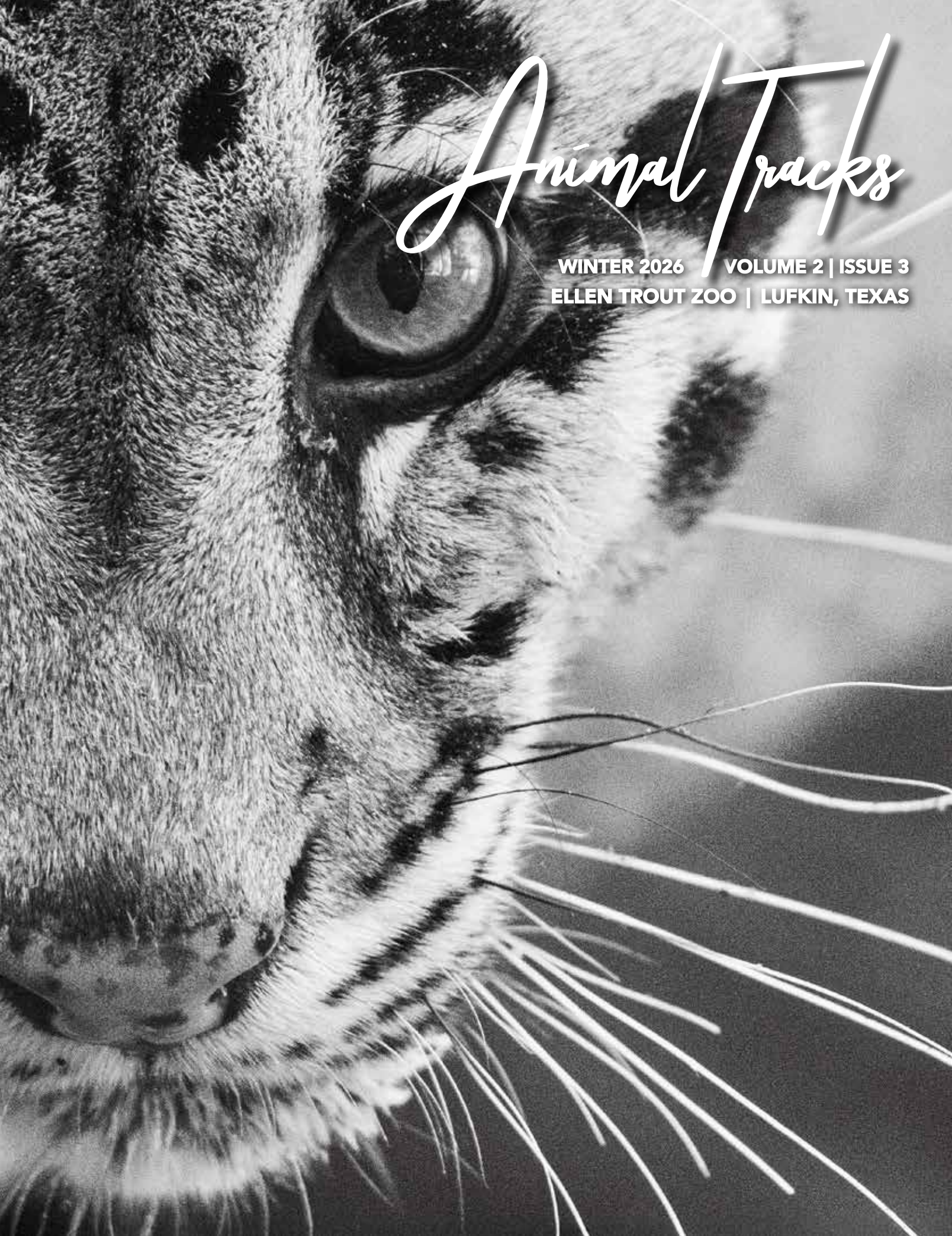

Animal Tracks

WINTER 2026 VOLUME 2 | ISSUE 3
ELLEN TROUT ZOO | LUFKIN, TEXAS

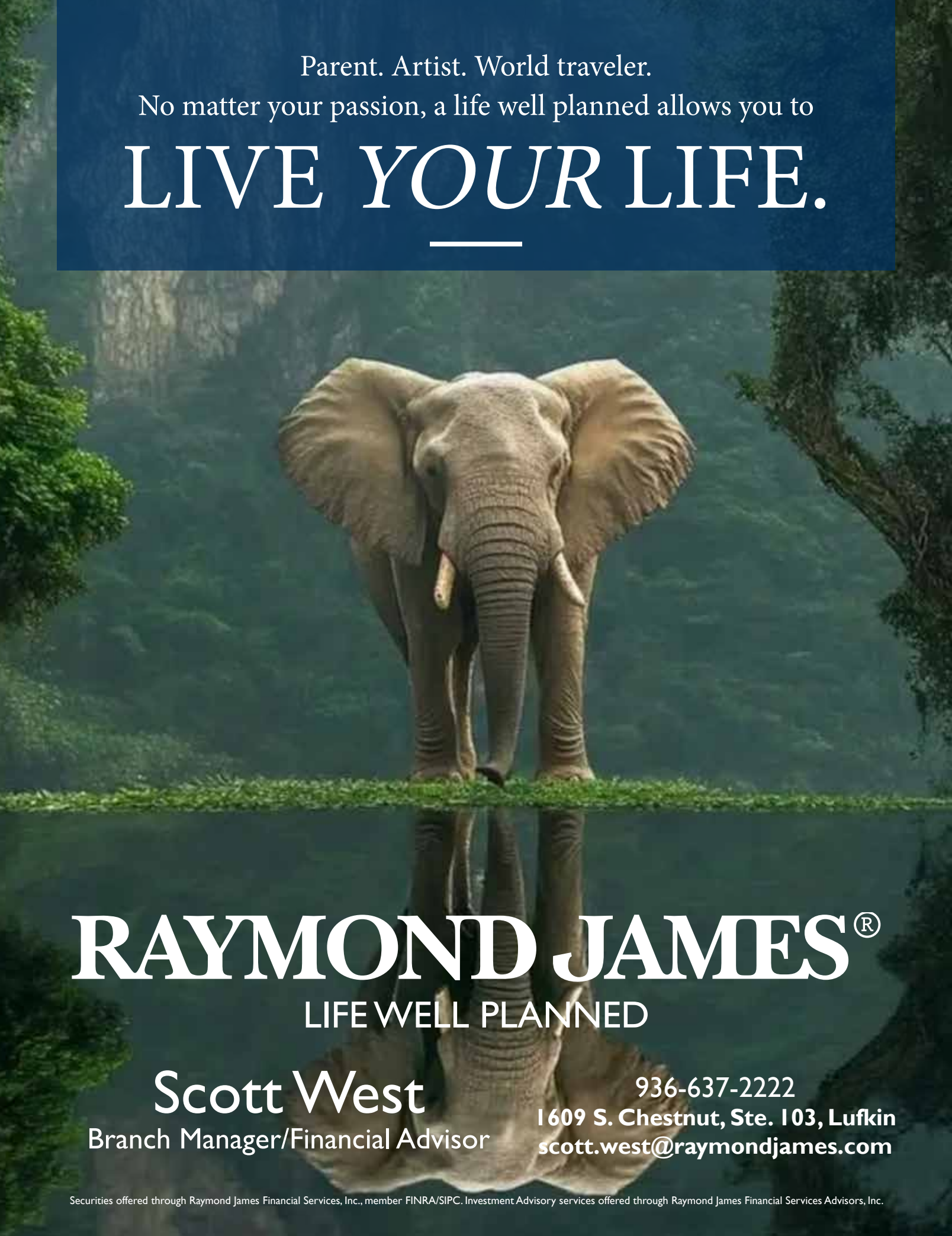
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TABLE OF *Contents*

winter 2026

DECEMBER

1-24 Elf on the Shelf

24 Christmas Eve, CLOSED

25 Christmas, CLOSED

JANUARY

1 New Year's Day, CLOSED

10 Behind the Scenes Tour, 8:30AM
Tiger, Giraffe, Hippo, & White Rhino levels only; children must be age 8+ to attend

---

FEBRUARY

7 & 14 Princess & the Frog Tea Party, 10AM-12PM, 2-4PM

ANIMAL & WILDLIFE

3
WORLD COATI DAY

4
INTERNATIONAL CHEETAH DAY

9
NATIONAL LLAMA DAY

DECEMBER

13
NATIONAL DAY OF THE SEAHORSE

21
INTERNATIONAL RUSTY-SPOTTED CAT DAY

27
VISIT THE ZOO DAY

CONSERVATION DAYS

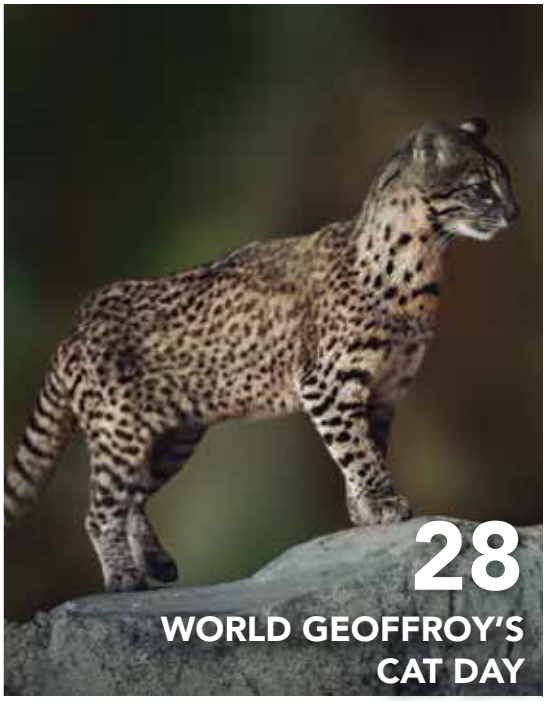
5
NATIONAL BIRD DAY

10
SAVE THE EAGLES DAY

16
APPRECIATE A DRAGON DAY

JANUARY

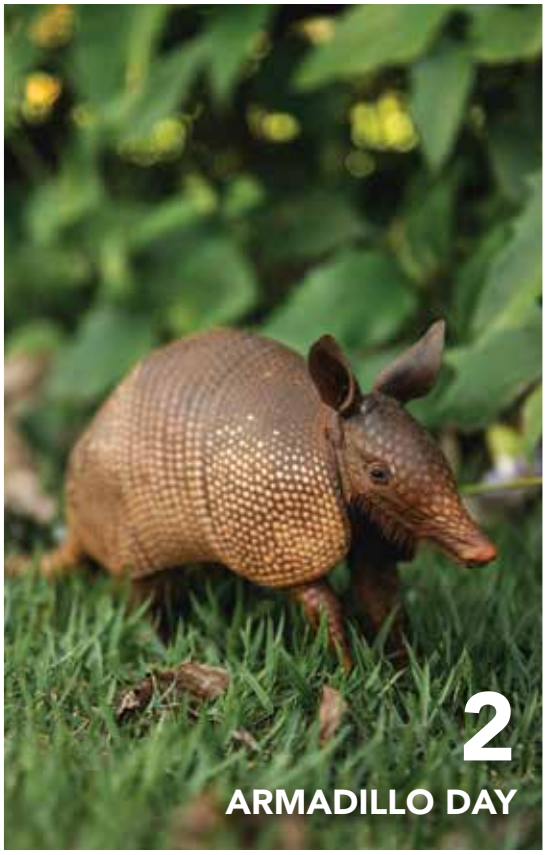
17
WORLD WATERFOWL DAY



28
WORLD GEOFFROY'S CAT DAY

31
INTERNATIONAL ZEBRA DAY


1
SERPENT DAY


2
ARMADILLO DAY


7
SUPERB OWL DAY

FEBRUARY


14
WORLD WHALE DAY


15
NATIONAL
HIPPO DAY


21
WORLD PANGOLIN DAY

WHAT'S NEW AT THE ZOO?

I recently experienced my first Zoo Boo. Everyone told me how popular the event is but my assumptions about the event did not reflect reality. This year, Zoo Boo may have been the most successful the zoo has ever had. As the event becomes more popular, the zoo staff will be investigating ways to make the event more guest friendly.

HABITAT UPDATES

Bald eagles are now back in their new and improved home which had been damaged by a falling tree. The new primate exhibits are closer to completion, and the staff is getting excited about moving the De Brazza's monkeys and lemurs to their new homes. Lions and jaguars have been off public display as we make upgrades to their homes and to improve guest viewing. These improvements will allow us to bring Malayan tigers back to the zoo and we are making arrangements to transport a male tiger to Lufkin before the end of the year. Malayan tigers are considered critically endangered and there may be fewer than 100 left in the wild. Ellen Trout Zoo, along with other US zoos, are providing a genetic reservoir and a secondary population in the event the wild population continues to decline. By becoming a member of the zoo, you are helping to protect wild tigers and preserve their native habitat.

THE END OF AN ERA

As everyone knows, Gordon Henley retired in January after 48 years. What you probably didn't know is that Charlotte Henley, Gordon's wife, was still employed by the zoo as our animal records keeper. Charlotte has now officially retired as well. She held many roles at the zoo, most notably as the zoo's first director of education. As a result of her dedication, perhaps hundreds of thousands of school children had the opportunity to learn about wildlife and the importance of preserving our natural resources. While they have both retired, Gordon and Charlotte are still around, they visit with us often and have great stories to tell.

Architectural renderings provided by WDM Architects.

PLANNING AHEAD

Lastly, I'd like to share some big news about the future of the zoo. For the past several months the zoo staff and the Friends of Ellen Trout Zoo board have been working with a zoo architecture firm to create a new experience for our guests and improve homes for animals. Construction documents are in development for "Wilds of Africa". This new experience will provide enhanced viewing for giraffe, rhinos, and crocodiles and for the first time, the zoo will be home to the reclusive okapi. Guests will have the opportunity to feed a giraffe from a covered deck accessed by a boardwalk over a canal. There will be a first of its kind opportunity to see Nile crocodiles in the water from the bridge over a canal. Our hope is that construction will be completed sometime in 2026. We'll keep you updated on our website and via social media as things progress.

Thanks to your continued support we hope to bring new experiences to our guests, create new and better homes for the animals and together we can help preserve and protect wild animals and wild places.

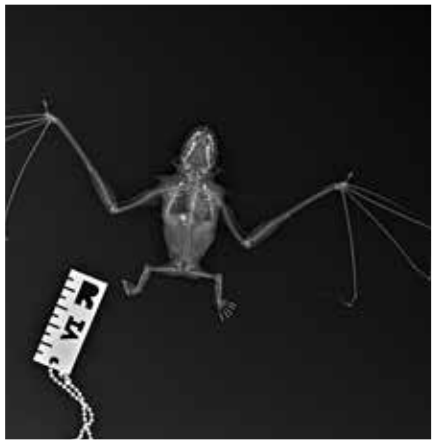
See you at the zoo!

Ryan
Executive Director


R


L


R




EDU ETZ Sir Pent
Date : 6/11/2025
Snake DV


HERPS ETZ DRAGO
Birth Date : 9/1/198
Lizard DV


PRIMATES-ETZ Patches
2/18/2025
VD


Study Date : 10/16/2025
Bird VD

WILD MEDICINE

BY **DR. STORMY PERRY, DVM**

The day-to-day life of a veterinarian is ever-changing, from wellness exams to emergency procedures. This is even more true with zoo veterinarians who may work on anything from a very small invertebrate to some of the largest species on the planet! Humans have always been fascinated with animals but when did we start really caring for them? From the first doctors of ancient civilizations to today's high-tech hospitals and specialists, veterinary medicine has evolved in remarkable ways. What began as simple treatments has grown into a sophisticated science that helps protect wildlife, preserve species and ensures every animal receives the care they deserve.

While the first modern veterinary school was opened in 1761 in France, the practice of medicine has a much longer history. While it is impossible to definitively claim where or when animal husbandry was established, evidence suggests care began as early at 9000 BCE. This is evidenced by fossil records of dogs with healed fractures and cow skulls upon which surgical procedures had been performed. One of the earliest known written veterinary texts was estimated to have been made nearly 3000 years ago. As humanity evolved, so did the techniques and equipment.

The first veterinary schools were focused on learning the diseases of horse and livestock while combining hands-on experience. As the centuries turned, discoveries in the human field (i.e., vaccines, germs) transformed veterinary practice. While most vets in this era focused on livestock (healthy herd = healthy community), these advances laid the groundwork for the ability to care for all kinds of species. With the industrial revolution and the rise of automobiles, vets started to shift focus from large animals to our smaller companion animals. Now then, what about our zoo animals?

Exotic creatures were brought from faraway lands, but little was known about their health, diets or behavior. The evolution of organized zoo animal medicine began in 1946 with a handful of veterinarians working in zoos and sharing their expertise. This group continued to grow and learn, eventually creating the specialty under the American College of Zoological Medicine in 1983. As a whole, the veterinary profession has moved from treating sick animals, to encouraging preventative health to keep animals healthy and extending lifespans. Zoo vets also play an important role in education and conservation through study and research, interacting with the public, and ensuring every animal lives a life as natural and healthy as possible.

From the first stethoscope to MRI, technology has truly improved in veterinary medicine. Researchers are now exploring how genetics, artificial intelligence and 3D printing can help diagnose and treat animals. Veterinarians also embrace the idea of "One Health" – the understanding that the health of animals, people and the planet are all connected. Future veterinarians will not only continue to provide the best care, but will also inspire others to care about wildlife and the environment. From the first healers thousands of years ago to veterinarians using advanced technology today, the story of veterinary medicine is one of constant growth and compassion, turning curiosity and care into conservation.

Grace Brown

FROM CAMPER TO KEEPER

STORY BY **GARY STALLARD**

Call it "destiny." Or "fate." One way or another, Grace Brown was going to become a very important part of the Ellen Trout Zoo.

Now the Primary Hippo Keeper at the zoo, Brown's path from an early age steered straight to – and through – every part of one of East Texas' favorite attractions. She began participating in the Education Department's "Zoo Camp" (for ages first through sixth grade) before becoming a Junior Zoo Keeper for two more years. At the time, she said, she got the opportunity to follow around actual zoo keepers while assisting in animal care.

"I got to sit and watch them do their jobs, and I was involved," Brown said. "It's such a neat program."

At the age of 18, the young zoo fan became a "Seasonal Keeper", leading straight into her latest role. Of course, her love for the zoo wasn't just about the programs. It was all about the animals.

"I've always wanted to work with animals for sure," Brown said. "I think that's a goal a lot of kids have. But the zoo was such a big part of my childhood. I came here a lot. I grew up around here, and that was one of our main activities. If we were free on a Saturday or Sunday, we would come to the Ellen Trout Zoo. It was really just that I enjoyed being here at this zoo. It was the place to be, I guess."

Even then, the idea of working in a zoo full-time was mostly just a dream. But then, Brown said, she saw an opening for a Seasonal Keeper at the zoo.

"I applied on a whim," Brown laughed. "I really didn't think I was going to get the job. I thought it would be a good experience to apply and go through the interview process. I was going to college that fall semester, so I thought it would be a good summer thing if I ever did actually get the position. I didn't really expect anything, so I was surprised when I received the phone call letting me know I'd been accepted."

That one summer job solidified her life goals, according to Brown, who majored in Biology at the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor.

"That first summer, it really set in that I want to do this," Brown said. "I loved caring for the animals and being in this environment.

"I came back the next summer and applied again, and I got the position again. Then it made it the idea of doing this for a living a concrete one."

She probably would have been fine working with any animals (she said she didn't grow up with a favorite), but once again destiny – or fate, or whatever – ensured she'd land where she wanted.

"I have paintings I did during the Junior Zookeeper Program," Brown said. "We did some stuff with the hippos: We painted on their faces, and we stuck the canvas to their faces for imprints. I still have those paintings. I was around 11 or 12 years old. I didn't think about it at the time, but I had memories of the hippos before I even had a job here."

Now, her daily duties include everything the hippos need: feeding, training, cleaning – each part of the hippo's day involves Grace Brown. The training includes husbandry and voluntary blood-drawing training to help monitor the hippos' health.

How, exactly, does one train a hippo? It's not quite the same as teaching a dog to sit. "It's a little more tedious than training a dog for sure," Brown laughed, "but hippos are very food-motivated. A lot of it is trust in me that I'm not doing anything scary. We give them lettuce, for example, when they're doing a good job. It's all about establishing consistency, and it can be repetitive. We get one behavior down, then we can build to the next behavior we want. For example, the blood-drawing training. Their skin is so thick we have to go through their tail. So we work on getting them to let us touch their tail first. When they're comfortable

with that, then we work on holding onto the tail a little longer and maybe lift it. From there, we can build up to the actual behaviors we want to see. Hippos are very intelligent animals. They learn so quickly."

No one, no matter how cool a job may seem, wants it to be all about the work. There's got to be a little "play time" involved as well, and Brown said she gets that with her hippos.

"I definitely get to hang out with them, especially in the morning while they're still in their barn. I make sure to spend time with them. They like scratches on their shoulders, and I like giving them enrichment, which can be anything from a snack to getting hosed down with a water hose. It's kind of my time to reinforce trust with them."

Because of her bond with those animals, Brown said she has learned how different her animals' personalities can be.

"I can often tell who's who even if I don't get a good look at them just based on the way they hold themselves, their posture," Brown said. "Nakili is a lot more confident, so she's going to hold herself upright more often. If there's food involved at all, she's there, and she's pretty sociable. Jazi is very sweet. She's a little more introverted. She's more likely to hold her head down a little. She's shy, but she's very sweet. I didn't expect to see such personality differences between two hippos who live together the majority of their lives."

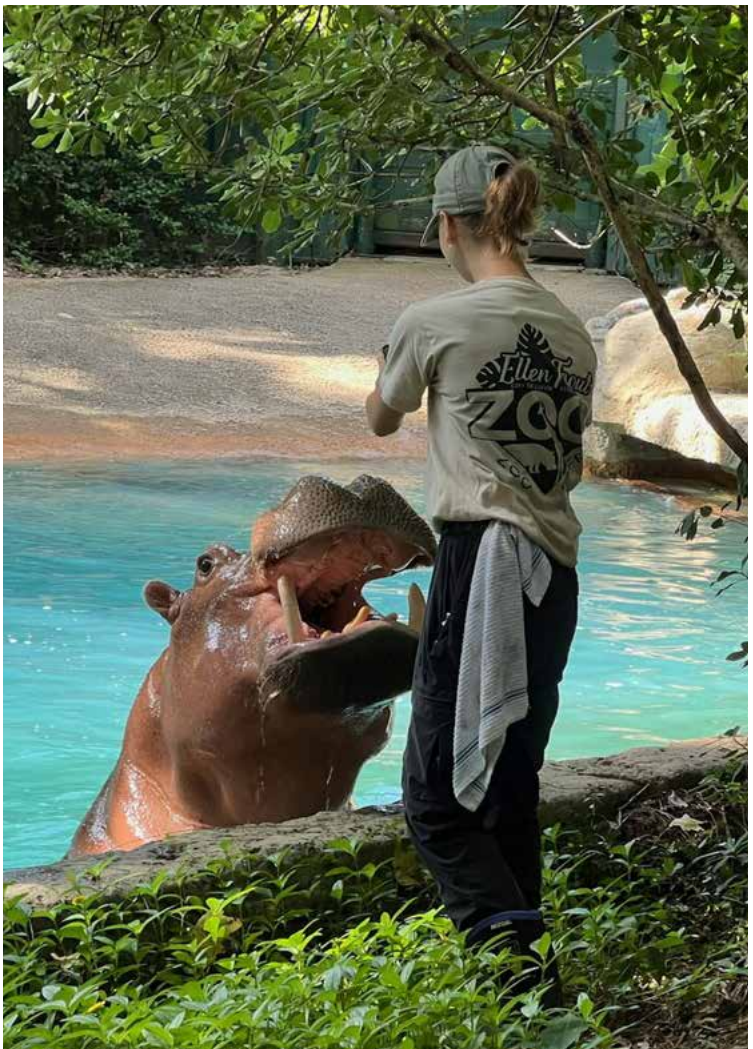
Brown credited her family – including her brother, who was her childhood partner in their zoo-following ways – with their continuous support.

"They're very supportive, and they have been my whole life when it comes to my dream," Brown said. "They support my zookeeper oddities. They're happy to hear me talk about what my animals are doing and why."

For now, Brown said she feels she's living out a childhood dream. However, she knows there are ample opportunities ahead to let destiny – or fate, or whatever – continue guiding her professional path.

"I'm very happy where I am right now, but in the future, I definitely plan on continuing my education," Brown said. "The original plan was to settle into the job, and I certainly feel settled right now, but further education is definitely on my horizon."

Until then, she's perfectly happy giving hippo scratches and water-hose baths.



INDIAN FLYING FOX *facts*

WHERE ARE THEY?

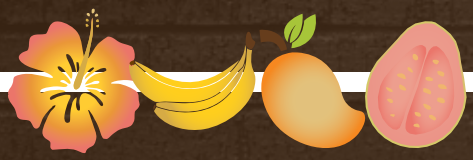
Found across the Indian subcontinent, including India, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh.

NT

Listed as Near Threatened by the IUCN, with populations declining in some areas due to habitat loss, hunting, and human conflict. They are often persecuted for raiding fruit crops, though it plays a vital role in the ecosystem

During heavy rain, Indian flying foxes have been observed wrapping their wings around their bodies like cloaks, using the leathery membranes to stay dry — a behavior rarely seen in other bat species.

DIET



They prefer sweet fruits with a juice content above 70%, rejecting under-ripe or dry fruits. They feed by chewing fruit to extract juices and pulp, discarding seeds and fibrous material.

October
MONTH OF BAT APPRECIATION

HABITAT

Lives in tropical forests, mangroves, urban areas, and agricultural lands.

THE EYES HAVE IT

They have excellent eyesight adapted for low-light conditions, as flying foxes do not use echolocation.

SIZE

WINGSPAN:
Up to 5 feet.

BODY LENGTH:
About 10–12 inches.

WEIGHT:
Typically between 1.3–3.3 pounds.

Capable of traveling

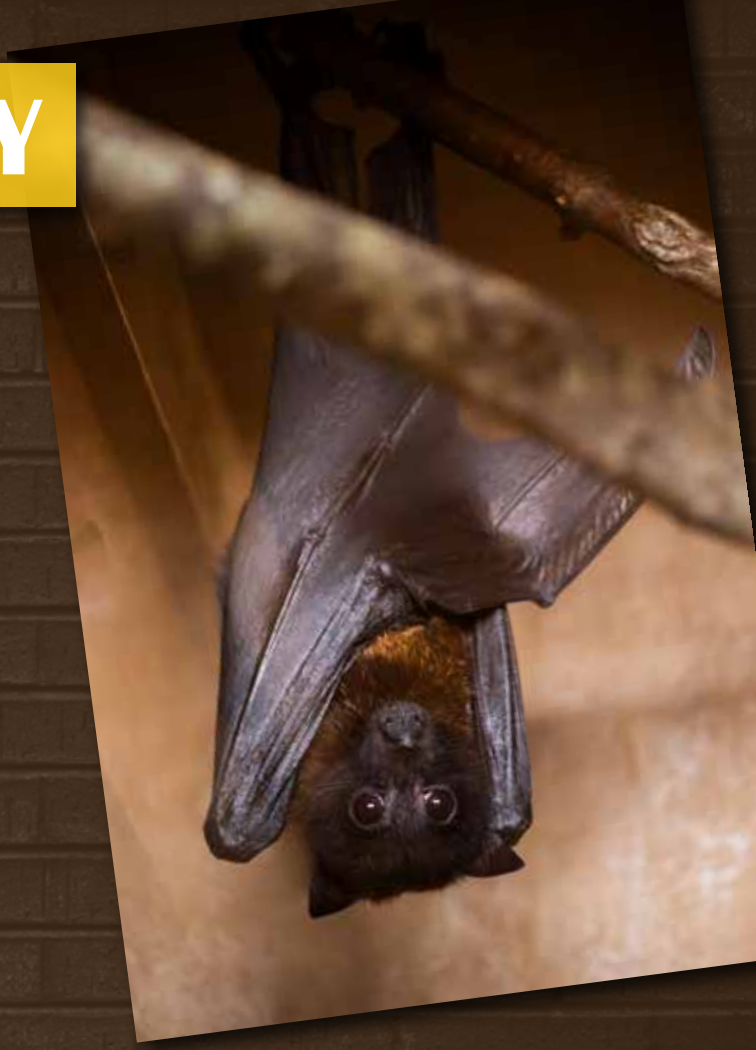
30-60 miles

nightly in search of food.

Meet OUR COLONY

Ellen Trout Zoo is home to three Indian flying foxes. Two of them were born here in Lufkin, TX over 17 years ago and the third just turned 10 last August. All three live in our courtyard exhibit outside our SOLAR room. Like most bats, they sleep during the day and become active at night. However, unlike what some people might think, these bats don't drink blood or eat insects, but enjoy a fruit salad for dinner. Bats are also very smart and can solve puzzles that we put their food in or on as enrichment. A great example is suspending their food from a plastic chain that requires the bat to figure out how to pull up the food it wants.

Lawrence Stalnaker
PRIMARY KEEPER



When roosting, a group of Indian flying foxes, like other bats, is called a

COLONY

When Indian flying foxes are flying together, the group is called a

flight OF BATS

Even without echolocation, they can detect ultraviolet light reflected from ripe fruit and certain flowers, helping them find food under moonlight.

Indian flying foxes belong to a bat family that's been around for over 30 million years, with roots going back nearly 60 million years. They were the first megabat ever described scientifically, in 1792 — long before most tropical mammals were even known to Western science.

Known as a

"mega-disperser"

due to its ability to transport seeds over vast distances.

Revered in some cultures for its ecological role and feared in others due to superstitions.

WILD ADOPT

animals depend on people too

Our goal is to continue to connect everyone to the world we live in, and to bring joy to not only the animals, but the surrounding communities as well. Your ADOPT Sponsorship helps provide new or improved homes and enrichment for the animal of your choice and all the animals at the Zoo.

Before Feathers and Flight

Long before birds spread their feathers or bats stretched their wings, the skies already belonged to a different kind of flyer. They were the pterosaurs — the original engineers of the air.

Rising more than 228 million years ago during the late Triassic, pterosaurs were the first vertebrates to achieve true, powered flight. They weren't dinosaurs, though they shared the same ancient world. Instead, they were reptiles built for the open sky: light, hollow bones, enormous breast muscles, and wings made not of feathers but of thin membranes of skin stretched along an elongated finger. The smallest were the size of sparrows. The largest, like Quetzalcoatlus, could stand as tall as a giraffe and soar for miles without a single wingbeat.

How could something so large even lift off? Nature's answer was efficiency. Pterosaurs had bodies designed to waste no motion. Their bones were paper-thin but reinforced inside by intricate struts — natural engineering that made them light but strong, like modern airplane wings. When grounded, they used all four limbs to run, then jump, launching themselves into the air in a powerful vault, unfolding their wings in mid-step. Once airborne, they were masters of glide, using updrafts and thermals to stay aloft with minimal effort.

What makes pterosaurs especially remarkable is that they represent just one of four times flight has evolved in the history of life. Insects were the first to take to the air, followed by pterosaurs, then birds, and much later, bats. Each group solved the same problem — how to defy gravity — in its own way. Birds use feathers; bats stretch skin between four long fingers; pterosaurs relied on a single, spectacularly extended pinkie finger.

Even among reptiles, the dream of flight appeared more than once. During the Triassic, smaller cousins like Kuehneosaurus and Icarosaurus grew wing-like ribs that let them glide from tree to tree — more like living paper airplanes than pilots. Today, modern Draco lizards still do something similar in Southeast Asia, unfurling colorful membranes to drift between branches. But only the pterosaurs truly flew.

And for more than 150 million years, they did it beautifully. From coastal fishers with long, spear-like jaws to insect-snatchers darting over rivers, they filled the skies above the dinosaurs just as birds do today. When they finally vanished at the end of the Cretaceous, their place was waiting — ready for the next generation of sky engineers to take over.

Every time a heron glides silently over a pond, or a bat twists effortlessly through the dusk, we're watching echoes of that first great experiment in flight. The wings may be different, but the dream is the same.

A TEXAN WITH WINGS

Quetzalcoatlus northropi was discovered in 1971 by Douglas Lawson, a graduate student from the University of Texas at Austin, during a fossil expedition in Big Bend National Park. Named after the Aztec feathered serpent god Quetzalcoatl, this pterosaur could have had a wingspan of up to 36 feet — roughly the length of a small airplane.

It likely soared over warm, coastal lowlands, feeding on small animals or fish. The discovery changed how scientists understood giant flight, proving that the skies above what's now Texas once belonged to creatures beyond imagination.

Enrichment

WHERE CURIOSITY
COMES TO LIFE

From the smallest turtle to the largest hippo, every animal at Ellen Trout Zoo benefits from enrichment designed to engage their senses, spark curiosity, and support natural behaviors.

At Ellen Trout Zoo, enrichment isn't just about toys — it's about awakening the senses. Every day, keepers use enrichment to inspire natural behaviors, spark curiosity, and keep animals physically and mentally engaged. It might look like fun, but it's much more than playtime. It's instinct in action.

Sometimes, enrichment takes the form of movement: a bowling ball for our rhino to nudge across the yard, or a hanging hay feeder that keeps our giraffes stretching and foraging just as they would in the wild. Other times, it's problem-solving — a climbing rope for our cotton-top tamarins or a puzzle feeder that challenges a parrot's clever mind. And sometimes, enrichment is all about scent.

To a big cat, the world is written in smell — and our keepers know just how to keep that story interesting. A few spritzes of Axe body spray or a hint of doe urine can spark an explosion of wild energy. Lions roll, tigers chuff, jaguars rub their cheeks and claim their space with the same confidence they would in the savanna or jungle.

And then there's our otter — a bundle of motion and mischief — who adores diving through a curtain of "kelp" made from strips of car wash fabric, foraging for hidden fish beneath the surface, surfacing to make a pile, and diving right back in again. For her, enrichment is a game, a hunt, and pure delight rolled into one.

These moments — of movement, scent, sound, and surprise — are what your generosity helps create. Each year, the Enrichment Tree appears in the Ellen Trout Zoo Gift Shop, its clear ornaments filled with wishes from our animal care team. Inside each ornament is an enrichment idea, waiting to come to life.

When you purchase an ornament, you're not buying a toy — you're making an experience possible. You're helping our keepers replace well-loved favorites, introduce new scents, and imagine fresh ways to keep animals exploring, reacting, and thriving.

Stop by the Gift Shop this season, choose an ornament that speaks to you, and help us keep curiosity alive for every creature that calls Ellen Trout Zoo home.

WHEN INSECTS

Long before dinosaurs roared across the continents, Earth was alive with a quieter kind of power — the steady hum of wings.

The year was somewhere around 350 million B.C., deep in the Carboniferous Period, and the planet was lush, warm, and heavy with oxygen. Forests of enormous ferns and clubmosses rose from the swampy ground, forming green cathedrals that stretched for miles. The air was damp and dense, every breath filled with the scent of moss and decay.

In this world, insects reigned supreme.

They grew to sizes that defy imagination today. Dragonflies with wings wider than a hawk's glided over the mist. Millipedes longer than a person coiled through the undergrowth. Even the ancestors of cockroaches scuttled through the shadows, their glossy wings catching flashes of sunlight that barely reached the forest floor.

The secret behind their size was in the air itself.

The Carboniferous atmosphere held nearly 35 percent oxygen, compared to the 21 percent we breathe now. Insects don't have lungs — they breathe through a network of tiny tubes called tracheae — so higher oxygen meant their bodies could deliver air farther and faster. Evolution took advantage of that gift, and the insects responded by growing big enough to dominate the planet's ecosystems.

For tens of millions of years, they did just that.

But the world was changing. The continents began to collide, pushing up the first great mountain ranges. The climate shifted.

RULED THE EARTH

Rainfall that once fed endless swamps began to fade. As the forests dried, the vast wetlands that had been the planet's oxygen factories started to collapse.

Without the dense green canopy, oxygen levels fell. The air thinned.

For the insect giants, it was the beginning of the end. Their massive bodies, once perfectly suited for a supercharged atmosphere, could no longer draw in enough oxygen to survive. The great dragonflies vanished. The enormous millipedes disappeared into the fossil record.

The forests that had built the world's first ecosystems left behind one last gift — the coal that would one day power the modern age — and the age of giants came to a close.

Yet the insects themselves endured. The survivors adapted, trading size for specialization. They became smaller, faster, and far more efficient. Some learned to metamorphose — reshaping their bodies completely between youth and adulthood. Others discovered new defenses, colors, and ways to thrive.

And they never lost their foothold.

Today, insects outnumber every other form of animal life on Earth. From bees pollinating crops to beetles recycling forests, they remain the planet's quiet engineers — living descendants of the first creatures to truly rule the land and sky.

If you've ever watched a dragonfly skim across a pond or heard the steady buzz of summer cicadas, you've heard the echo of that ancient world — a reminder that the age of insects never really ended.

Egg Carton Turtle

BY KAT HOLCOMB
MUSEUM OF EAST TEXAS

Give your egg carton an elongated life, like that of the turtle. According to legend, the longest-lived turtle, Alagba, was an African spur-thighed tortoise that lived until 344 years old!

Materials

- Egg carton
- Pom pom
- Googly eyes
- Pipe Cleaner
- Hot glue
- Scissors
- Paint or markers

Instructions

Paint or color one egg carton section to make the turtle's shell.

To assemble the turtle, you will need a pom pom for the head, two googly eyes, and a pipe cleaner for the turtle's legs and tail.

Cut the pipe cleaner into 4 pieces. Fold each piece in half and twist the together to make the legs and tail, and glue them on the inside of the shell.

Glue on the pom pom and googly eyes to give your turtle a face!

Living

Some species tell their story not through change, but through endurance. While most of life on Earth has evolved, adapted, and reinvented itself countless times, a rare few have remained almost unchanged for millions of years. Scientists call them living fossils — animals whose ancient designs still thrive in the modern world. They are proof that when evolution finds something that works, it often decides to keep it.

To be called a living fossil doesn't mean a species has stopped evolving altogether, but that its fundamental form and function have remained remarkably consistent. These creatures are the blueprints of survival — built so well for their environments that nature rarely needed to revise the plans. They bridge the gap between past and present, letting us see what life looked like in a world long before our own.

Take the turtle, for example. Fossils more than 210 million years old show shells nearly identical to those of modern turtles. Their slow metabolism, protective armor, and amphibious lifestyle have carried them through mass extinctions and continental drift with quiet success. The same can be said for crocodilians — alligators, crocodiles, caiman, and gharials — whose sleek, armored bodies and ambush-hunting style have barely changed since the days of the dinosaurs. When you look into the eyes of an alligator basking along a riverbank, you're seeing the same design that watched ancient reptiles thunder past 80 million years ago.

Even some creatures that appear delicate have equally ancient roots. Fossils reveal that flamingos, with their long legs and specialized filter-feeding beaks, have existed in almost the same form for more than 30 million years. Their feeding behavior — straining algae and tiny crustaceans from shallow water — is a strategy perfected early and still efficient today. And then there are the ocean's veterans: horseshoe crabs, which have scuttled across

Fossils

the seafloor since the Ordovician period, over 445 million years ago. Their hard domed shells and blue blood, essential in modern medicine for detecting bacterial contamination, link the ancient seas directly to our modern laboratories.

Beyond the zoo gates, other lineages tell similar tales. The coelacanth, a deep-sea fish once thought extinct since the age of dinosaurs, reappeared off the coast of Africa in 1938, its lobed fins and slow grace unchanged. In New Zealand, the tuatara continues to represent a reptile branch older than any lizard or snake alive today. Each of these species reminds us that time doesn't erase every trace of the past — sometimes, it preserves it in living form.

To see a living fossil is to look backward through millions of years. They are nature's endurance artists, surviving cataclysms that wiped out nearly everything around them. In their eyes, shells, and scales are stories written before mammals, before flowers, before humans. They remind us that evolution isn't always about novelty — sometimes, it's about perfection.

At Ellen Trout Zoo, visitors can witness several of these survivors firsthand. The American alligator, with its prehistoric profile and patient stillness, could have stepped straight out of the Cretaceous. Our turtles—from pond dwellers to riverine swimmers—carry the same armor that protected their ancestors more than 200 million years ago. Even the graceful flamingo, standing tall and sifting through the water with its curved beak, follows feeding rituals unchanged since long-vanished prehistoric lakes. Each one connects the present to an ancient world, reminding us that deep time isn't just history—it's alive and well, right here in East Texas.

Pictured left to right: Galapagos tortoise, Chinese alligator, horseshoe crab, and tuatara.

PREHISTORIC PANTRY

From fern-munching giants to meat-crunching titans, evolution has reshaped appetites as much as it has anatomy. Here's how the diets of ancient animals compare to their modern-day relatives — including some you can meet right here at the Ellen Trout Zoo.

THE SAUROPOD SALAD BAR

THEN: Giant long-necked sauropods like Apatosaurus stripped entire trees of ferns and cycads.

NOW: Modern-day analogs like giraffes and elephants play similar roles as high-reach herbivores, keeping vegetation trimmed and forests healthy.

THE PRIMATE PLATTER

THEN: Early primates and their close relatives dined on fruit, leaves, and insects in the treetops of ancient forests — their grasping hands perfect for foraging.

NOW: Modern monkeys continue that omnivorous trend, enjoying a mix of produce and protein-rich treats.

THEN: Crocodyliforms have been ambushing prey since before the time of dinosaurs.

NOW: Modern alligators and crocodiles eat fish, birds, and mammals using the same explosive lunge perfected 80 million years ago.

CROCODILIAN CRUNCH

FILTER-FEEDER FEAST

THEN: Ancient shorebirds and pterosaurs waded through shallow seas, straining fish and crustaceans through long beaks.

NOW: Flamingos feed the same way — filtering tiny shrimp and algae through their specialized bills.

THEN: Around 120 million years ago, snakes evolved a flexible skull and jaw that let them swallow prey much larger than their heads.

NOW: Modern snakes still use that ancient design, "walking" their jaws over prey and swallowing it whole.

SNAKE SNACKS

THE OTTER'S RIVER BUFFET

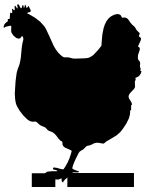
THEN: Early aquatic mammals in prehistoric rivers and estuaries hunted fish, crustaceans, and mollusks — paving the way for modern semi-aquatic predators.

NOW: River otters use keen eyesight and dexterous paws to catch fish and crustaceans, much like their ancient ancestors.

THEN: Ancient mammals like Onychonycteris were among the first to master flight, swooping through prehistoric skies in search of insects.

NOW: Modern fruit bats and flying foxes evolved from those same aerial pioneers, trading bugs for fruit nectar.

THE BAT BANQUET



THE CHICKEN & THE TYRANNOSAURUS

A FAMILY REUNION 65 MILLION YEARS IN THE MAKING

What do the fiercest dinosaur and your breakfast bird have in common? More than you'd ever guess.

Picture this: you're standing in front of a Tyrannosaurus rex, a predator so huge its head alone could swallow you whole. Its ominous bellow echoes through the air, trees tremble, and smaller creatures scatter in fear. Now, zoom forward 68 million years and meet a modern chicken — small, fluffy, and busily pecking for seeds. One seems built for terror, the other for scrambled eggs. But peel back the layers of time and feathers, and you'll find they're branches of the same ancient family tree.

FROM THUNDER LIZARD TO FEATHERWEIGHT FLYER

When paleontologists began finding fossils of smaller, birdlike dinosaurs — creatures with claws, feathers, and even wishbones — the puzzle pieces started clicking together. These were the raptors, the quick, agile hunters of the dinosaur world. Over millions of years, they grew lighter and faster. Feathers that once helped regulate body temperature or attract mates became tools for gliding and, eventually, true flight.

One of the most famous fossils, Archaeopteryx, looked like a half-finished experiment: feathers and wings like a bird, but a long bony tail and sharp teeth like a dinosaur. It's often called the "missing link," a living snapshot of evolution in progress.

PROOF HIDDEN IN THE BONES

For years, scientists could only make educated guesses about how close birds and dinosaurs really were. Then, in 2005, researchers studying a fossilized T. rex bone made an astonishing discovery. Inside the rock-hard fossil, they found preserved soft tissue, complete with traces of collagen proteins identical to those found in modern chickens. That connection, hidden for 66 million years, revealed that dinosaurs and birds share not just a family resemblance — they share molecular fingerprints.

Even the way birds breathe links them to their prehistoric relatives. Both have a one-way air system that keeps oxygen flowing efficiently through their lungs — a highly advanced design compared to mammals. Add hollow bones, scaly feet, and an S-shaped neck, and you've got all the makings of a mini-dinosaur in your backyard.

WHEN THE SKY FELL

About 66 million years ago, a catastrophic event changed everything. A six-mile-wide asteroid slammed into what is now Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula, carving out the massive Chicxulub crater. The impact unleashed tsunamis, wildfires, and a cloud of debris that darkened the sky for months. Temperatures plummeted, plants died, and the mighty dinosaurs that once ruled the Earth disappeared — or so it seemed.

But the story didn't end there. Some small, feathered dinosaurs managed to survive. Their light bodies, warm blood, and ability to eat a wide range of foods gave them the edge in a drastically changed world. Over time, those survivors evolved into the birds we know today.

Scientists now agree that while other forces like volcanic activity may have worsened the extinction, the asteroid impact was the main trigger — the dramatic turning point between the Age of Dinosaurs and the Age of Birds.

THE NOT-SO-FLIGHTLESS CHICKEN

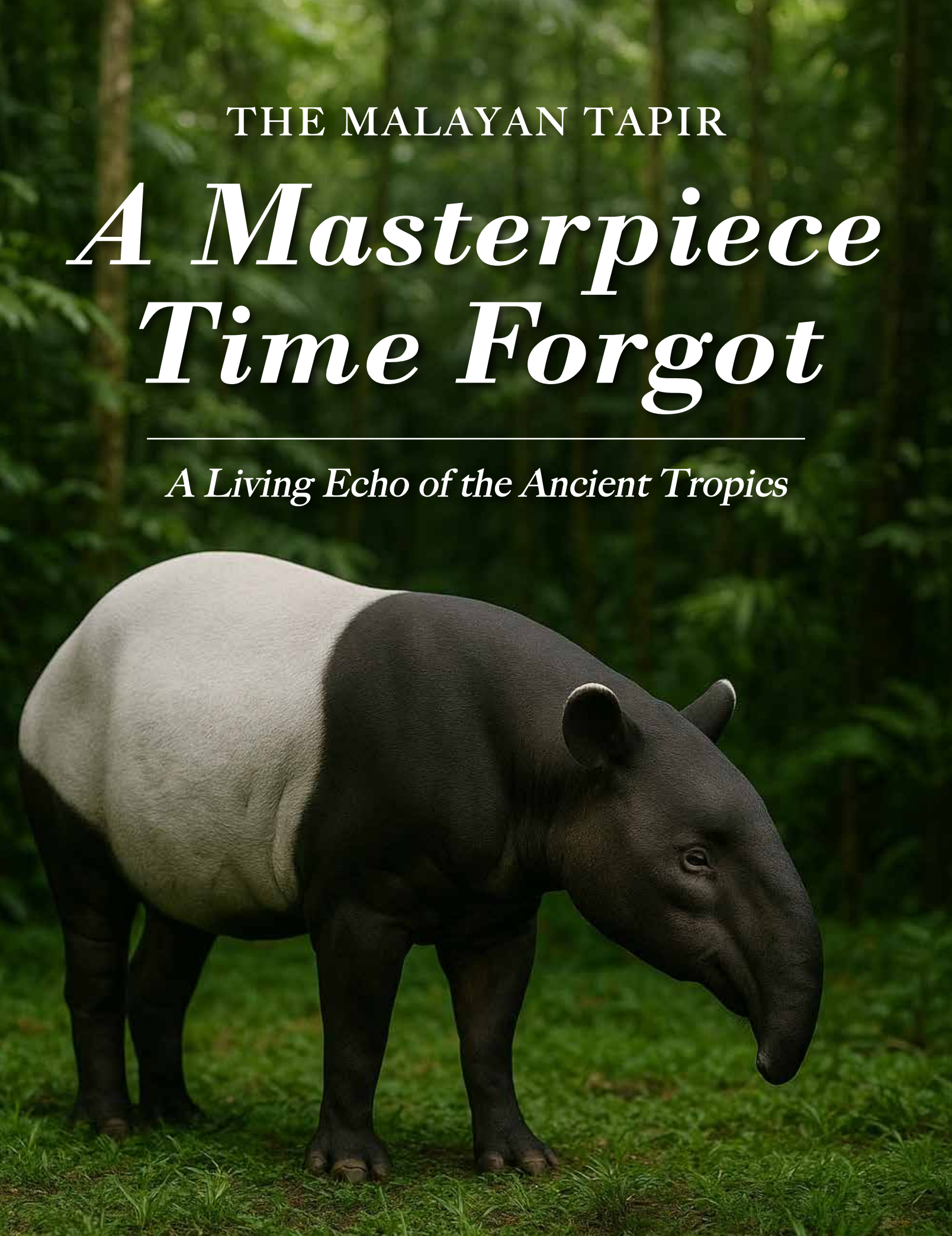
Of course, evolution works with what it's given — and sometimes, it trades one skill for another. Chickens can fly, but not in the way we usually imagine birds soaring across the sky. Their wings are built for short, powerful bursts — just enough to hop a fence, reach a low branch, or escape a fox.

Their wild ancestors, the red junglefowl of Southeast Asia, are more nimble fliers and still roost in trees. But centuries of domestication and selective breeding made today's chickens heavier, more grounded, and much less aerodynamic. They may not migrate or glide over mountains, but they haven't forgotten how to flap — or where those wings came from.

THE DINOSAUR IN YOUR BACKYARD

So the next time you watch a chicken scratch the dirt or tilt its head to study you, remember: you're looking into the eyes of a creature whose ancestors once ruled the Earth. That cluck is the echo of a bellow softened by 65 million years of change.

The age of dinosaurs never truly ended — it just learned to fly, even if some members of the family prefer to stay closer to the ground.


THE MALAYAN TAPIR
A Masterpiece Time Forgot
A Living Echo of the Ancient Tropics

If you've ever seen a Malayan tapir, you know it looks like something time forgot — a creature with the sturdy body of a small rhino, the flexible nose of an elephant, and the two-tone pattern of an animal painted in halves. It seems impossible, as if evolution decided to keep one of its earliest masterpieces exactly as it was.

And in many ways, that's true. Tapirs are among the oldest surviving large mammals on Earth, part of a lineage that has endured for 20 to 30 million years. Their ancestors grazed in prehistoric forests beside mammoths, giant ground sloths, and saber-toothed cats. While most of those Ice Age giants vanished, the tapir quietly carried on, surviving the shifts of climate, the rise of new predators, and the arrival of humankind.

Today, the Malayan tapir stands as the last of its kind in Asia — a living echo from a time when the world was still young.

A Design That Never Needed Redrawing

Everything about the tapir tells the story of survival through subtlety. Its striking black-and-white pattern, which looks almost cartoonish in daylight, becomes perfect camouflage under the soft silver of a tropical moon. In the shadowy rainforests of Malaysia, Thailand, and Sumatra, predators like tigers see a broken outline rather than a body. That white saddle across its back blurs the animal's shape, turning it into a patch of light among the leaves.

Its flexible, trunk-like snout acts as both tool and sensor. The tapir uses it to pluck tender leaves, tug fruit from low branches, and even explore scents on the breeze — a built-in combination of hand and nose that would make any inventor jealous. Short, sturdy legs and splayed feet help it move silently through mud and undergrowth, or swim with surprising grace through jungle streams.

Tapirs may look slow, but they're surprisingly agile, able to dash into the water when startled. They often take to the water at night, swimming or wading to feed and cool off — a habit that's helped them avoid predators for millions of years.

The Quiet Survivor

What makes the Malayan tapir remarkable isn't its strength or speed but its ability to endure by staying unnoticed. In a world that rewards the flashy and the fierce, the tapir has survived through patience and calm. It doesn't roar, pounce, or chase. It browses, blends, and continues.

That quiet nature, however, can make it vulnerable in the modern world. The tapir's camouflage, once its greatest defense, now works against it when it wanders near villages or across roads at night. The same shadows that once concealed it from tigers can't hide it from headlights.

Once widespread across Southeast Asia, Malayan tapirs are now endangered, with fewer than 2,500 left in the wild. As many as 30 Malayan tapirs are killed by vehicles and trains each year. Forests that once stretched unbroken for hundreds of miles are now divided by farms, highways, and towns. Each fragment of forest becomes a smaller island — harder to find, harder to cross, and harder to call home.

A Living Connection to the Past

At Ellen Trout Zoo, the tapir's story continues with care and purpose through Cole and Tembi, our male and female tapir. Each quiet step through their habitat connects visitors to a lineage that predates us all — a living reminder of how much history can exist within a single heartbeat.

When you watch a tapir browsing among the leaves, you're not just seeing an animal. You're seeing an echo of the ancient tropics, a design so well-balanced that it never needed revision. Tapirs survived ice ages, volcanic winters, and shifting continents not by being the biggest or boldest, but by fitting perfectly into the world around them.

Their presence today is both a triumph and a warning — proof that even the most time-tested species can fade if their world fades with them.

A Lesson in How to Last

We tend to marvel at dramatic survivors — the armored, the fanged, the feathered. But sometimes, the most remarkable endurance belongs to those who stayed steady and sure. The Malayan tapir is no relic frozen in time; it's a living lesson in balance, patience, and quiet resilience. In an age when change happens faster than ever, this gentle grazer reminds us that sometimes the key to survival isn't revolution — it's adaptation without losing yourself.

So when you see the black-and-white silhouette of a tapir moving calmly through its forest home, think of it as evolution's signature still visible on the page — proof that even after 20 to 30 million years, some masterpieces don't need editing.

Holiday GIFT GUIDE

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Wildlife Walk

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7. Cottage Door Press Books
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The Terror Bird's Tiny Cousin

Long before South America filled with jaguars, tapirs, and giant anteaters, it was ruled by birds. Towering, flightless predators known as terror birds—the Phorusrhacidae—once strode across open plains with hooked beaks and a bone-shattering kick. Standing up to ten feet tall, they were the top hunters of their age, long after the dinosaurs had vanished.

Today, that ferocious family is gone. All that remains of the terror birds' long and fearsome lineage is a smaller, slender relative that still walks the grasslands of South America: the red-legged seriema (*Cariama cristata*).

At first glance, seriemas hardly look like they belong to such an infamous family. Standing about three feet tall, they resemble a mix between a roadrunner and a crane, with soft tan feathers, bright orange legs, and a delicate crest above the beak. But look closer, and the family resemblance appears. Like their prehistoric kin, seriemas have sharp, hooked beaks and long legs built for running down prey. Most telling of all is their hunting behavior—when they catch a lizard or small snake, they slam it against the ground or a rock to stun or kill it before swallowing it whole. Paleontologists believe terror birds used that same brutal technique when hunting their small mammal-sized prey.

Seriemas belong to an ancient bird order called Cariamiformes, which dates back more than 60 million years. This order once included a diverse cast of species: swift runners, giant predators, and, eventually, the modest-sized seriemas we know today. While the massive terror birds went extinct about two million years ago, the seriema family endured—trading towering size for agility, flightlessness for the ability to glide, and savage power for survival in a changing world.

Modern seriemas live in the grasslands and scrub of Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay, and northern Argentina. They spend most of their time on the ground, but they can fly short distances when alarmed, often retreating to a low branch or fence post. Their loud, ringing calls echo across the savanna—sometimes described as laughter, though it's a sound that might once have sent smaller creatures running for cover.

Though they no longer rule their ecosystem, seriemas remain a fascinating window into a lost world. They are, quite literally, the last living branch of an ancient family that once held evolutionary power over a continent. Watching a seriema stalk across its habitat today is a rare privilege—a glimpse into how the Age of Birds once reigned, and how a tiny survivor carries the spirit of the terror birds into the present.

Timeless Survivors

For millions of years, some creatures have survived everything Earth could throw at them — shifting continents, volcanic winters, asteroid impacts, and ice ages. They are masters of endurance, shaped by evolution to adapt, survive, and thrive no matter how the planet changed around them.

But in a twist of fate, the greatest challenge these ancient lineages now face isn't natural at all.

It's us.

Species like crocodilians, turtles, and rhinos are living reminders of a time when the planet was younger and wilder. Their ancestors shared the Earth with dinosaurs and the earliest mammals. They watched empires of giant reptiles rise and fall, outlasted catastrophic extinctions, and weathered every natural upheaval since. Yet the pressures of the modern world — habitat loss, pollution, poaching, and climate change — are proving more dangerous than any asteroid.

Their survival stories aren't just about endurance. They're about adaptation, cooperation, and the delicate balance between nature and human care.

The Ancient River Kings

Crocodilians have been Earth's apex ambush hunters for more than 80 million years. Their modern-day design is so efficient that it has barely changed since the late Cretaceous. Streamlined bodies glide through the water with silent precision. Armored scales act like natural chainmail. Powerful jaws snap shut with enough force to crush bone.

They are the perfect blend of patience and power — hunters who can wait motionless for hours before launching a lightning-fast strike. Their eyes, ears, and nostrils sit high on their heads so they can see, hear, and breathe while nearly invisible beneath the surface.

It's easy to imagine their ancestors lurking in the same still waters that once reflected the shadows

of dinosaurs. And yet, even these ancient predators are not immune to change. Across the globe, wetlands are drained, rivers are dammed, and coastlines are developed. Many crocodilian species — from the Chinese alligator to the Philippine crocodile — now survive only in small, protected pockets of habitat.

Conservation programs work tirelessly to reverse that trend, protecting waterways and managing breeding populations in zoos. At Ellen Trout Zoo, guests can meet members of this ancient order — living fossils whose watchful eyes connect us directly to Earth's primeval past.

The Armored Wanderers

If crocodiles are nature's river kings, turtles are its quiet philosophers. These shell-bearing travelers have been around for over 200 million years, older than snakes, birds, or even crocodiles themselves. They have seen continents drift apart, oceans rise and fall, and climates shift again and again — yet they keep moving, slow and steady.

Their unique shells — part bone, part armor — are among evolution's greatest inventions. Each one is a built-in fortress, protecting its owner from predators, storms, and time itself. But even the best armor can't stop a plastic bag mistaken for a jellyfish or a car on a darkened highway.

In just a few decades, turtle populations have dropped dramatically. Plastic pollution clogs their habitats. Poachers harvest them for meat, shells, or the pet trade. Coastal nesting grounds disappear under beachfront lights and construction.

To counter these threats, zoos, aquariums, and conservation organizations have created "head-start" programs — raising hatchlings until they're large enough to survive, restoring beaches, and teaching communities how to live alongside these patient survivors.

Every turtle that slides into the water carries the legacy of an unbroken line stretching back to the dawn of the dinosaurs. Their slow pace has never been a weakness — it's a rhythm that kept them alive for eons.

The Armored Giants of the Grasslands

Where the turtle endures through patience, the rhino survives through strength. Their ancestors once roamed with mammoths and saber-toothed cats, grazing across Ice Age plains. They evolved thick hides, massive size, and the unmistakable horn — a defense against natural predators that once made them nearly untouchable.

But evolution could never have prepared them for the modern world. Today, only five species of rhino remain, all under threat. Their horns, made of the same material as human fingernails, have become symbols of status and superstition, fueling an illegal trade that has pushed some species to the brink.

Despite this, there is hope. From Africa's wide savannas to Asia's dense forests, conservationists are rewriting the story of survival. Protected sanctuaries, anti-poaching patrols, and community partnerships are helping rhino populations recover. Rewilding efforts have even begun returning rhinos to landscapes where they disappeared generations ago — a powerful reminder that humans can also be agents of renewal.

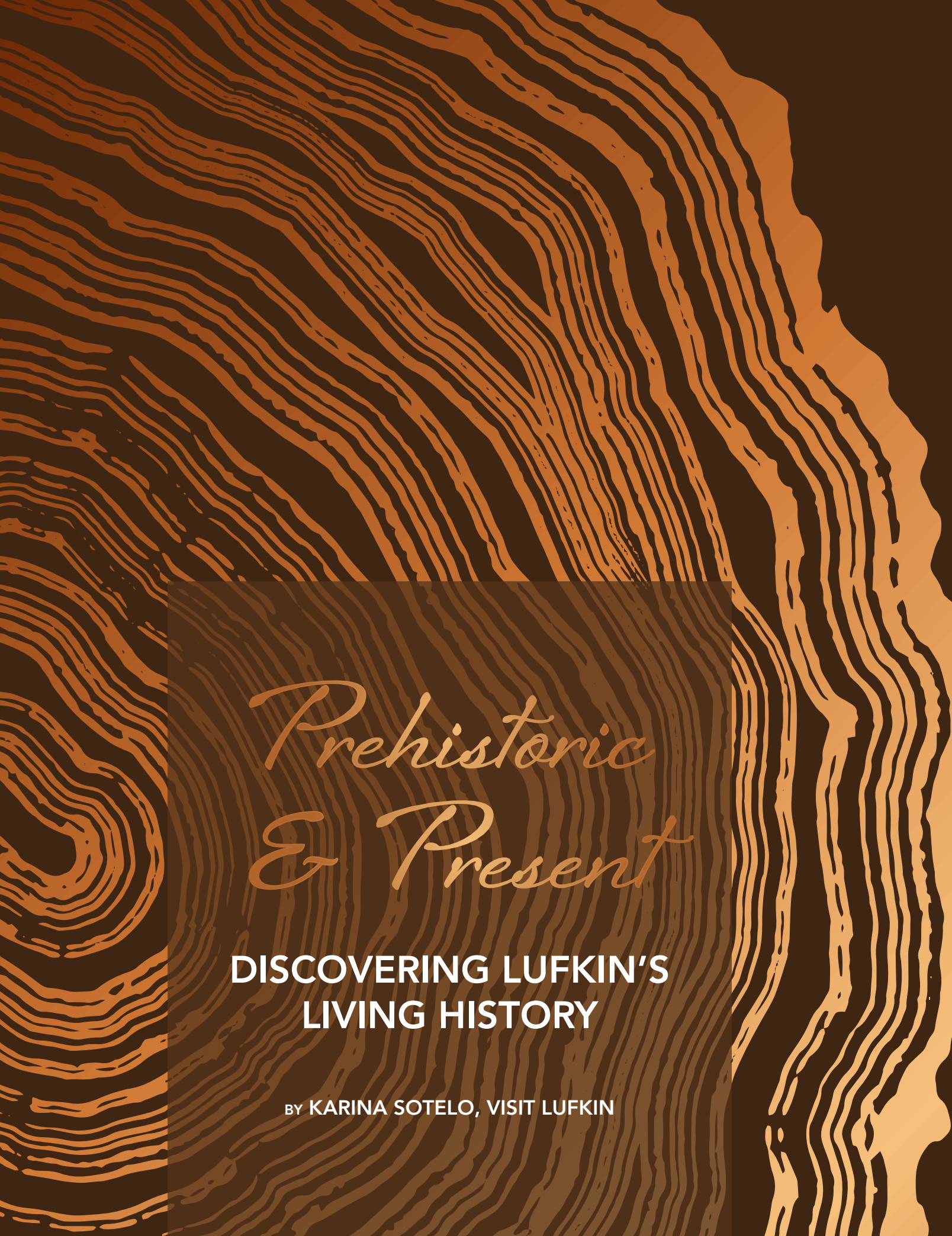
At Ellen Trout Zoo, the Southern white rhinoceros stands as both relic and testament. Watching one graze quietly beneath the sun is to glimpse the resilience of life itself — an unbroken chain stretching back millions of years, still holding strong.

A Living Link Between Eras

Here at Ellen Trout Zoo, these creatures stand not as museum pieces, but as living proof of Earth's endurance. Our crocodilians represent one of the most complete collections in the country — descendants of the same line that shared the planet with T. rex. Our turtles, from freshwater swimmers to land-dwelling grazers, still carry the same ancient armor that has guarded their kind for over 200 million years. And our rhino yard brings visitors face-to-face with one of the last great megafauna — a giant whose story depends on the choices we make today.

They remind us that survival isn't only about strength. It's about balance, patience, and persistence — the quiet traits that let life continue through every storm.

These animals have carried their ancient blueprints into the modern world. Now, it's our turn to adapt — to protect, restore, and ensure that these timeless survivors never fade into prehistory. Because when we fight for them, we're really fighting for something far greater: the living memory of Earth itself.



Prehistoric & Present

DISCOVERING LUFKIN'S LIVING HISTORY

BY KARINA SOTELO, VISIT LUFKIN

What if you could see the story of life unfold from the creatures that once roamed the Earth millions of years ago to the animals, forests, and ecosystems that still carry their legacy today? In Lufkin, Texas, you can.

STEP BACK IN TIME WITH THE *Naranjo Museum of Natural History*

Fossils, dinosaur bones, and sparkling gemstones line the halls of the Naranjo Museum of Natural History, telling the story of how our planet came to life. From towering T. rex skeletons to prehistoric insects, the museum shows a time when oxygen levels were higher and even bugs grew to astonishing sizes. It is pure wonder. Children light up when they learn that ancient insects once spanned the size of dinner plates, and adults cannot help but marvel at how nature adapts and evolves.

FROM ANCIENT FORESTS TO MODERN CONSERVATION WITH THE *Texas Forestry Museum*

A few miles away, the Texas Forestry Museum connects the prehistoric past with our modern world. East Texas pine forests are descendants of some of Earth's oldest plant families, silent witnesses to thousands of years of change. Visitors can explore how forests have shaped our environment and our communities. The museum's exhibits show that our modern timber industry has deep roots that stretch back to the first forests that covered the planet.

If the Naranjo Museum tells the story of Earth's beginnings, the Texas Forestry Museum shows us how that story continues right outside our doors.

A LIVING LINK TO THE PAST AT THE *Ellen Trout Zoo*

At the Ellen Trout Zoo, visitors can see living examples of nature's oldest designs. The tapir, with its small trunk-like nose and ancient lineage, has barely changed since the Ice Age. It is like seeing a living fossil. Even the zoo's birds, from owls to exotic species, remind us of their dinosaur ancestors. Their feathers, claws, and keen eyes are proof that the age of dinosaurs never truly ended.

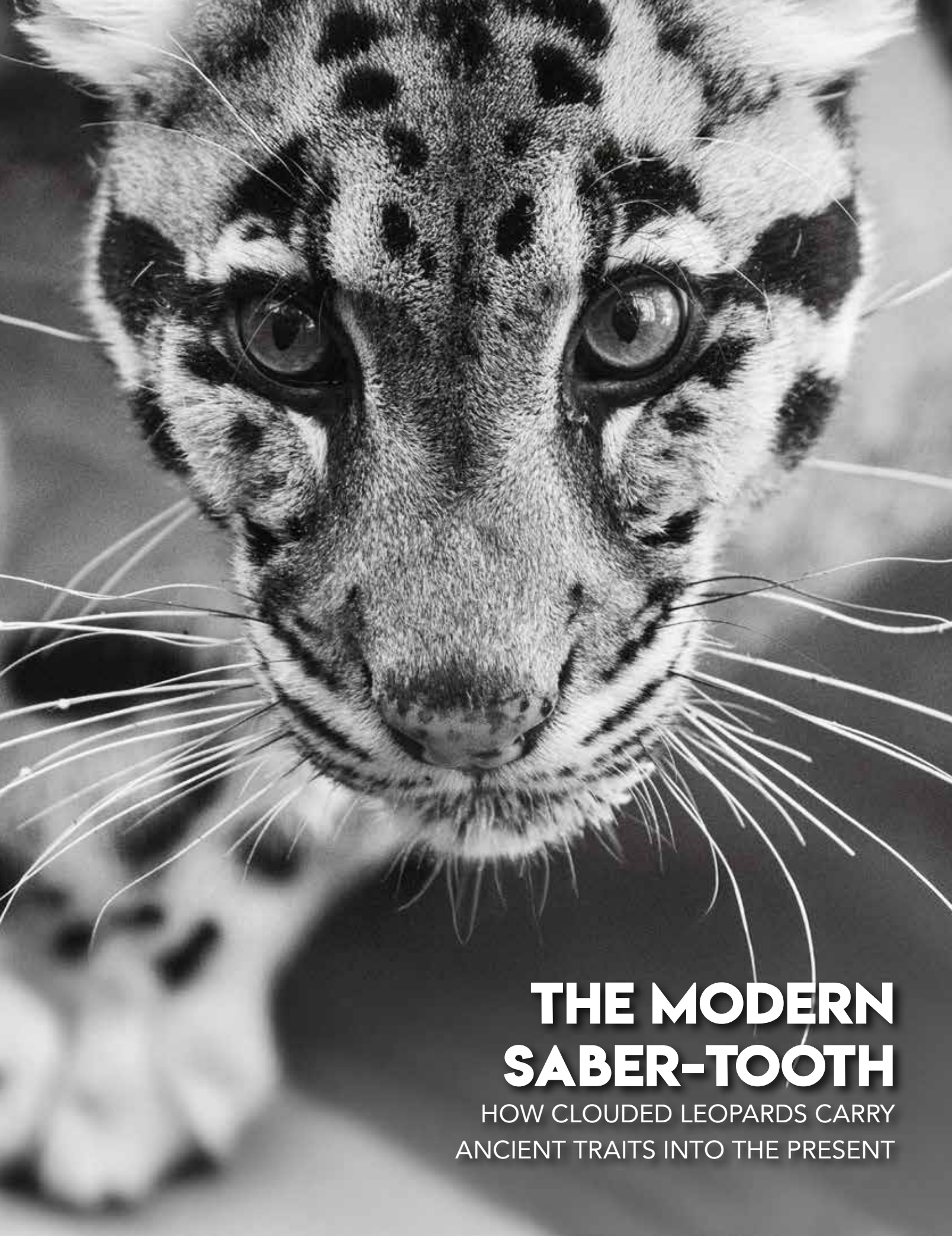
When visitors watch these incredible animals, they are reminded that evolution is still unfolding right here in Lufkin.

THEN AND NOW CONNECTED IN LUFKIN

Whether you are staring into the eye sockets of a T. rex at the Naranjo Museum, walking beneath pine canopies at the Forestry Museum, or watching the quiet movements of the tapir at Ellen Trout Zoo, you are experiencing a story that continues to grow. Prehistoric and present are not opposites; they are part of the same timeline. And in Lufkin, that connection is alive and thriving.

Plan your own "Prehistoric and Present" day in Lufkin. Explore ancient life, lush forests, and living history, all in one unforgettable visit... and don't forget to

Visit Lufkin!



THE MODERN SABER-TOOTH

HOW CLOUDED LEOPARDS CARRY ANCIENT TRAITS INTO THE PRESENT

Long before lions ruled the savanna or tigers stalked Asia's forests, the world belonged to a very different kind of cat. With canines like steak knives and neck muscles thick as tree trunks, the saber-toothed tiger — *Smilodon fatalis* — was the Ice Age's ultimate hunter. It prowled the Americas, striking fear into herds of mammoths, camels, and giant ground sloths.

About 10,000 years ago, climate shifts, prey loss, and human expansion ended the saber-tooth's reign. Yet in the shadowed forests of Southeast Asia, a faint echo of that powerful design still moves among the trees — sleek, silent, and breathtakingly beautiful. That echo is the clouded leopard (*Neofelis nebulosa*), a cat so unique that many zoologists call it the closest living parallel to the prehistoric saber-tooths.

THE ECHO OF EXTINCTION

At first glance, the clouded leopard seems modest beside its Ice Age counterpart. It weighs only 30 to 50 pounds — hardly a match for Smilodon. But look closer, and the resemblance becomes clear.

Like the saber-tooth, the clouded leopard wields elongated, dagger-like canines — proportionally the longest of any living cat. Powerful neck and shoulder muscles anchor those teeth, giving it an extraordinary downward bite. Paleontologists believe Smilodon used that same motion — a lightning-fast, crushing strike to the throat or abdomen — to bring down prey.

The resemblance extends beyond anatomy. Clouded leopards are ambush hunters, relying on stealth and precision rather than speed. When they strike, it's with the same decisive accuracy that once made the saber-tooth one of history's most specialized predators.

MASTERS OF THE TREETOPS

What sets the clouded leopard apart is where it hunts. While Smilodon ruled the plains, the clouded leopard is the phantom of the canopy. Its long tail acts as a counterbalance, its flexible ankles rotate nearly backward, and its claws grip bark like climbing hooks. These adaptations make it one of the best climbers in the cat family — able to hang upside down, walk along branches like a balance beam, or descend headfirst with ease.

In the dense rainforests of Southeast Asia — from the Himalayas to Borneo — this agility gives the clouded leopard an edge. It can ambush prey from above, leaping down in a blur of spotted fur and muscle. In those moments, its ancestors' ancient power resurfaces: a silent hunter, a sudden strike, and a perfect design that time refused to forget.

EVOLUTION REPEATS ITSELF

The link between Smilodon and the clouded leopard isn't ancestry but convergent evolution — when unrelated species develop similar traits to solve the same challenge. Across millions of years, both cats faced the same problem: how to subdue prey quickly and efficiently.

Long canines extended their reach. Muscular necks powered their strike. Compact bodies delivered explosive strength in short bursts. Evolution, working from different blueprints, arrived at the same masterpiece: precision over speed, strength over endurance.

It's a humbling reminder that natural selection isn't random chaos — it's creativity guided by need. When something works in nature, it tends to appear again, refined and reimagined.

BETWEEN THE ANCIENT AND THE LIVING

Today, clouded leopards are found in dwindling numbers across Southeast Asia's rainforests. They face the same threat that once doomed so many Ice Age giants — habitat loss. As forests shrink, these shy cats lose not only their hunting grounds but the towering trees that define their way of life.

At Ellen Trout Zoo, the story of the clouded leopard continues under the care of our pair, Indy and Saffron. Visitors who glimpse one reclining or walking silently along a branch are seeing more than a rare and beautiful cat — they're witnessing evolution's memory made flesh. Every motion, every yawn revealing those impossibly long teeth, connects the present to the distant past.

In that moment, the line between the prehistoric and the modern blurs. The saber-tooth's legacy lives not in bone or fossil, but in the living grace of a cat that carries ancient power into the age of people and cities. The clouded leopard stands as both survivor and symbol — proof that nature's best designs never truly go extinct.

Leap Into the Fun at

ELLEN TROUT ZOO

Princess and the FROG tea party

BY **WHITNEY ANDERSON, ZOO EDUCATION DIRECTOR**

This February, the Ellen Trout Zoo is inviting young royalty and frog enthusiasts alike to a memorable way to learn about amphibians, ecology, and the natural world! Mark your calendars for February 7th and 14th, 2026, when the beloved "Princess & the Frog Tea Party" hops back into Lufkin, Texas — blending storybook wonder with science.

Little princes and princesses (ages 12 and under) will enjoy tea, treats, crafts, and games — all themed around the enchanting world of frogs. But this isn't just a tea party — it's a hands-on learning experience to inspire young conservationists! Children will meet real frogs from the zoo, discover the fascinating life cycle of amphibians, and learn how these tiny creatures play a big role in keeping our planet healthy.

Each child will create their own "froggy life-cycle map" and take home a special prize bag. Costumes and royal attire are encouraged, so break out those tiaras, capes, and frog hats for a perfect photo op in front of our castle backdrop. Volunteers, including Lufkin High School STEM and Interact students, plus our own Zoo Crew, help make this event such a success by running the activity stations and encouraging curiosity about nature.

Two sessions will be held each day of the event: 10 a.m. – 12 p.m. and 2 – 4 p.m. Tickets are $20 per person, and adults need to purchase a ticket with the child ticket. They tend to sell out quickly, so it is highly recommended to grab your tickets when they go on sale in early January on our website.

Join the Ellen Trout Zoo's Princess & the Frog Tea Party on February 7th & 14th, 2026, an event that shows how a touch of imagination can make learning about nature unforgettable!

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