

SUMMER GUIDE FOR FAMILIES

Virtual Encounters With Purring Cheetahs and Curious Penguins

Zoos are beginning to open, but digital experiences allow visitors to see ecosystems from a different perspective.

By **Laurel Graeber**

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Wild creatures seem to be experts at social distancing — at least when it comes to humans. Most of the time, you can't get within six feet of a leopard or a lemur on an ordinary trip to a zoo, which, with many cities' pandemic-related restrictions, now promises to be far from ordinary. Online excursions to wildlife parks, aquariums and nature centers, however, can offer more intimate and revelatory experiences than on-site visits. How often do you get to see a penguin wandering an aquarium by itself or have your own face-to-face encounter with a cheetah?

“We really see our virtual platform as relevant long after we open to full capacity,” said Bridget Coughlin, president and chief executive of the Shedd Aquarium in Chicago, which currently permits only 25 percent of its normal volume of visitors. Free digital journeys like the aquarium's Virtual Reality Penguin Expedition, available through a smartphone app, can be taken anytime, from anywhere. Consider the Shedd's viral moment in March, when it posted

videos of several penguins investigating the space in place of absent tourists. Online explorations, Dr. Coughlin added, allow visitors to see ecosystems “from a different perspective, and sometimes more from the animals’ perspective.”

Livestreaming webcams provide this engagement daily. The Wildlife Conservation Society in New York City has installed three at the Bronx Zoo — I’ve watched ring-tailed lemurs do playful acrobatics in the “Madagascar!” exhibit — and three at the New York Aquarium. (One is in the popular “Ocean Wonders: Sharks” display.)

While not all webcams operate around the clock, those at the Smithsonian’s National Zoo and Conservation Biology Institute do. During lockdown in April, Echo, a cheetah, delivered four cubs on camera at the institute, in Front Royal, Va. “It was spectacular that people could actually watch the birth and see them grow up,” said Pamela Baker-Masson, a zoo spokeswoman. (You can still watch the delivery on video.) Part of an off-site breeding program, the cubs will never reside at the zoo itself, in Washington, but you can follow their progress online.

As delightful as webcams are, they are prone to glitches and require patience. I checked a San Diego Zoo Safari Park webcam repeatedly before I finally glimpsed Birrarung and Eve, the only zoo platypuses outside Australia. If you prefer more immediate gratification, I recommend the National Zoo’s cam of Potpie, a black-footed ferret, and her kits, which seem to be always playing or snoozing adorably. Or catch the hilarious antics of the National’s naked mole-rats, which have all the grace of frenzied preschoolers at a birthday party. As the zoo’s website tactfully states, “Naked mole-rats engage in behaviors that may seem rude by human standards.”

The Shedd Aquarium's virtual content includes educational programming that not only introduces viewers to the aquarium's animals but also explores underwater biology and aquatic biodiversity. Brenna Hernandez/Shedd Aquarium

Pay to Play

For fees, some organizations have begun to offer far more intimate, interactive and reservations-only online experiences. On Saturday, the Shedd will introduce Virtual Penguin Encounters, small-capacity, 45-minute-long cybervisits (\$59.95 for nonmembers; \$54.95 for members) with the aquarium's staff and its birds.

This week, the Bronx Zoo started its own Virtual Wild Encounters. During these Zoom sessions, a few participants can closely observe one of a variety of species. "The keepers will show the animal and talk about it, and people can ask questions," said Karen Tingley, director of education, zoos and aquarium, for the Wildlife Conservation Society. The 15-minute encounters aren't cheap — they range from \$100 for an alpaca to \$250 for a cheetah — or predictable, but that unknown element may be part of the fun.

“The animals have personalities,” Ms. Tingley said. “We just promise an amazing experience.”

The 15-minute Virtual Animal Drop-ins from the Staten Island Zoo bring its residents to you. For \$50, a keeper and a creature — the possibilities include armadillos, sloths and chinchillas — will “crash” your own online event (an intriguing idea for a surprise gift).

Spring trim: Even though this year’s Sheep Shearing Festival was canceled, the Queens County Farm Museum captured the shearing of sheep on its #barncam. Sarah Meyer

More Free Options

For those not looking to spend money, the latest season of Animal Planet's television series "The Zoo" featured the Bronx Zoo (and the four other Wildlife Conservation Society parks); cable subscribers can stream the episodes free on the channel's website. The Staten Island Zoo, which is not part of the society, is working on a new free virtual tour, and its YouTube education channel offers video presentations of creatures like Bintu, an African crested porcupine who loves having his chin scratched.

If you miss the birding and nature walks at Wave Hill, a Bronx public garden, you can take brief virtual versions on its website, which also has apiary videos. (The garden plans to reopen its grounds on July 30.) And the Queens County Farm Museum, which in August will introduce Bee Cam, a streaming platform of its 30 honeybee hives, now offers #BarnCam, a program of social media posts that often feature the farm's sheep, alpacas and goats.

In response to the pandemic, the National Zoo has also restored #NatZooZen, brief videos on social media that document moments of serenity, like a cheetah purring or an American bison rolling exuberantly in the dirt. Although the zoo reopens (with restrictions) on Friday, it will continue to post those clips as stress relievers.

The San Diego Zoo has even made more than 25 online courses for professionals available to the public. "We built these self-guided educational modules for the zoological community," said Ted Molter, chief marketing officer for San Diego Zoo Global. "We recognized that some of this content was good for a general audience." Through August, anyone 13 or older can take a one- to two-hour San Diego Zoo Global Academy course tuition-free, and learn about tigers, great apes or koalas, among other animals. Educational opportunities for younger wildlife fans include Kids Corner, a series of videos with titles like "Misunderstood Meat Eaters" and "Aquatic Locomotors," which appear on the zoo's website for children.

Caught in the act ... of napping: The National Zoo's cam of Potpie, a black-footed ferret, and her kits. Smithsonian's National Zoo and Conservation Biology Institute

Online Camps

Young people who are missing their usual summer programs can still enroll in online camps. The Alley Pond Environmental Center in Queens has developed the Virtual Summer Science in the Natural World series, which includes live animals. The Shedd, which has many children's activities on its Stay Home With Shedd webpage, has added two weeks in August to its Summer Splash Camp: Stay Home Edition. The Wildlife Conservation Society offers sessions through the first week of September in its Wildlife Camp Online, which is much more international than previous years' in-person versions.

"We have access to W.C.S. scientists around the globe," Ms. Tingley said. "Many haven't been part of these programs because they're too far away." Students in the Wildlife Careers weeklong sessions for Grades 6 to 8 "get to interview several scientists who are out in the field," she said.

I look forward to continuing my own virtual explorations of wildlife parks in distant cities. This summer, I doubt I'll get to the zoo, but I'll be sure to keep spying on those black-footed ferrets.

Families visiting with the giraffes at the Bronx Zoo, which reopened to members earlier this week and will reopen to the general public on Friday. Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

For Trips That Aren't Virtual

If nothing but the real thing will do, you'll be happy to hear that zoos and nature centers in New York City have begun to welcome back visitors under Phase 4 of the reopening plan. Only outdoor exhibits and areas, however, are accessible, and because of the renewed ban on indoor entertainment, the New York Aquarium remains closed. Facilities can admit no more than 33 percent of their full capacities, and generally require social distancing (six feet) and visitors 3 and older to wear masks. It's a good idea to check an organization's website

when planning a visit; reservations or advance ticket purchases may be necessary, and even some outdoor displays may be closed. Here are guidelines for some locations in the city and region that are open or about to open this weekend.

Alley Pond Environmental Center, Queens: The hiking trails at the center's temporary location in the Oakland Gardens section are open.

alleypond.org

Hudson Highlands Nature Museum, Cornwall and Cornwall-on-Hudson, N.Y.: Although the Wildlife Education Center is closed, hiking trails at both locations are open on weekends. (They are closed or have limited hours on weekdays to accommodate the museum's summer camp.) The Grasshopper Grove nature play space is open on weekends by reservation only; visitors must book a 45-minute time slot online.

hnhm.org

Queens County Farm Museum: All 47 acres of this farm in the Floral Park section, except the children's petting zoo, will be open on Sunday only for the Grown on LI Farmers Market. (The museum's animals will be on display, and visitors can feed the goats.) Afterward, the farm stand at the front gate will continue to operate Wednesdays through Sundays, but the rest of the property won't reopen until Aug. 2.

queensfarm.org

Staten Island Zoo: This zoo in the West Brighton section will reopen to members on Saturday and Sunday and to the public on Monday. Advance online purchase of timed tickets will be required.

statenilandzoo.org

Wildlife Conservation Society: All four of the society's zoos — the Bronx Zoo, the Central Park Zoo, the Queens Zoo and the Prospect Park Zoo in Brooklyn — have opened to their members this week and will open to the public on Friday. Advance online purchase of timed tickets (free for health care workers) is required.

bronxzoo.com; centralparkzoo.com; queenszoo.com; prospectparkzoo.com