

A publication of the Seneca Park Zoo Society

# ZOONOOZ

MAY 2025

## SUMMERS HAPPENINGS!

Member Appreciation Week

ZooBrew

Jungle Jog 5k

Wine for Wildlife

Awareness Weekends

and so much more!

## TRAVEL PROGRAM

Madagascar and  
Monarch Migration,  
once in a lifetime  
experiences

**North American  
River Otters:  
A 30-Year Mission  
to Bring Back Otters  
to Western New York**

Suzie Webster  
River Otter

 Seneca Park  
Zoo



**Seneca Park Zoo** inspires our community to connect with, care for, and conserve wildlife and wild places.

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**CONTACT US: HOURS:**

<b>General info:</b> 585.336.7200	<b>Nov. 1 – March 31:</b> 10 a.m. – 4 p.m. last entry at 3 p.m.
<b>Membership:</b> 585.336.7212	<b>April 1 – Oct. 31:</b> 10 a.m. – 5 p.m. last entry at 4 p.m.
<b>Development:</b> 585.336.7205	
<b>Private events:</b> 585.295.7399	<b>Members may always enter at 9:30 a.m.</b>

LETTER FROM

**Pamela Reed Sanchez**  
President and CEO  
Seneca Park Zoo Society

**On My Mind:  
Otters, Otters,  
and Otters**

I have a confession: as I write this, I am distracted by an otter.  
Oh, there's another!

You see, my office is on the second floor of the Creatures from the River's Edge building, and I have a window that looks out over the otter habitat. Rain or shine, ice or heatwave, I have an excellent chance of seeing a North American river otter romping around.

Now that there are otter pups, the sightings are even more distracting. To be clear, this is in no way a complaint, and I do realize how fortunate I am that a perk of my job is the ability to see otters every day, without leaving my desk.

Earlier this year, I encountered my first river otter in nature. I was in South Carolina, on a nature preserve, and a friend and I had stopped the truck to watch what appeared to be a murmuration of tree swallows. As it ended, I looked out the front windshield. An otter was crossing the road about fifty yards ahead. It was unmistakable – no other creature moves like that on land. Had it been in the water, I might have missed it or mistaken it for some other mammal.

There it was, my first sighting of a river otter! I was ecstatic.

Isn't that funny, that a woman who sees otters nearly every day of her life gets emotional and giddy when seeing one "in real life"?



But it is because of THIS Zoo that I know how incredible these semi-aquatic creatures are. I know that they were once completely gone from our region and are now back in our region – and that human action contributed greatly to both facts. I know river otters are one of the great conservation success stories, and that Seneca Park Zoo played a role in that for our region.

I know that without the work of our zoo, and many other conservation organizations across this country, I might not have been able to see that river otter, who needs clean water and a habitat with adequate food, just like you and I do.

Zoos connect the conservation dots for our guests and members, from fostering wonder and curiosity to understanding the fragile balance of ecosystems, whether here or on the African savanna or in the mountains of Tibet. Each creature here – including adorable otter pups mastering the art of swimming – represents their counterparts in nature who need us to be the best possible stewards of this planet.

Now, I'm going to watch this otter for a few more minutes.

See you at the Zoo,

*Pamela Reed Sanchez*



Photos by  
Suzie Webster  
Erick Machajewski  
Chandler Scott

# North American River Otters and Seneca Park Zoo: A 30-Year Mission to Bring Back Otters to Western New York

By Beth LaPierre, Director of Communications and Engagement



TJ Harrison  
River Otter

Seneca Park Zoo recently announced the birth of three North American river otter pups, a first in Zoo history. Mom is Ashkii, who came to the Zoo in March 2020. The pups were sired by Gary, who was transferred to the Zoo in 2023 based on a breeding recommendation from the Association of Zoos & Aquariums (AZA) cooperatively managed Species Survival Plan® (SSP) Program. The pups are the first North American river otters born at the Seneca Park Zoo.

The pups are developing right on time. In March of 2025 we saw their eyes open and watched them explore the nest box. Ashkii is an excellent mom and has kept them fed and safe until they could venture out on their own. On April 3rd, the pups took their first swim in the pond in the otter habitat. One pup jumped right in, while the others had to be “gently” plunged by their mother. You will be able to see the pups out on habitat through at least late fall 2025.

While this is the first litter of pups born at the Zoo, we have been involved in North American river otter conservation for more than three decades. In the mid-nineties the Zoo, working with New York's Department of Environmental Conservation, assisted with relocating otters to Western New York. For more than 25 years the Seneca Park Zoo staff have been instrumental in the population management and protection of North American river otters for the Association of Zoos and Aquariums. More recently in 2018, the Zoo began working with RIT's College of Science to determine the genetic diversity of river otter populations throughout the United States.

## The Disappearance of Otters in Western New York

The North American river otter, commonly referred to as the river

otter, is a semiaquatic mammal native to North America, found across Canada and along the coasts and inland waterways of the United States.

The river otters' range has been significantly reduced due to habitat loss, a process that began with the European colonization of the Americas. Additionally, river otter populations suffered substantial declines from over-harvesting during the fur trade, a major economic activity in North America until the mid-19th century. The excessive trapping of river otters for their valuable pelts had a devastating effect on their numbers. Historically found in all watersheds in New York State, unregulated harvest, pollution, and habitat destruction decimated populations. The North American river otter was regionally extinct in Western New York in the early 1900s.

## Why save river otters?

**Besides being ridiculously cute**, otters serve as bioindicators. Their presence in an area often signifies clean water and a healthy freshwater ecosystem. North American river otters are highly susceptible to the effects of environmental pollution, a factor in their continued decline in numbers. Otters are at the top of the watershed food chain, meaning negative impacts to their food sources (fish, crustaceans, and other aquatic invertebrates) diminish the otter population. If otters can't find food in an area, they leave, searching for places with cleaner water provides the nourishment they need. Where otters are present, you'll find a thriving ecosystem.

*Continued on next page*



In 1972, the Clean Water Act was passed protecting our lakes, rivers, and watersheds from pollution, prioritizing the cleaning up the nation's streams, lakes, and rivers. This cleared the way to bring back species that were extirpated from Western New York, including the North American river otter.

### Bringing Otters Back

In the late 1990s, the New York River Otter Project was launched to restore river otters to the watersheds of western New York. Volunteers and staff from the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) live-trapped otters primarily from the Adirondacks, with additional animals captured from the Catskills and Hudson Valley. New York State was committed to reintroduce only otters from New York State, whereas other programs sourced otters from Louisiana and Missouri. While all North American river otters look similar, there are several subspecies of otters throughout the world. State officials and scientists sought to keep the same subspecies of otters for translocation as they were well-adapted for weather and other environmental conditions specific to New York State.

Seneca Park Zoo played a key role in the River Otter Project. All otters released in Western New York were first housed at the Zoo. Animal Health teams and veterinary staff provided exams and testing and placed transponders for nearly 280 animals. The transponders would allow scientists to track the otter for up to a year to determine survival and location.

Between 1995 and 2000, otters were relocated from eastern New York and released at 16 sites throughout the western part of the state including the Finger Lakes and Genesee River. Many of these areas had been without otter populations for longer than local residents could recall.

### A 30-Year Project

Thirty years later, our work continues; it takes decades and generations of the species to know whether efforts to repatriate a species have been successful for the long term.

In our last issue of ZooNooz, we highlighted the Zoo's Urban Ecologist team using eDNA technology to test watersheds around the Genesee River for the presence of North American river otters. This cutting-edge technology allows the Urban Ecologists to collect water samples, and then have scientists test the water for remnants of otters.

The good news: river otter DNA was found at nearly every site we tested, and we confidently say that North American River Otters have returned to Western New York.



**Read more about eDNA  
and otters here**



# Ensuring a Strong Future for River Otters

By Beth LaPierre, Director of Communications and Engagement



**It takes decades and generations to know whether efforts to repatriate a species have been successful.**



David Hamilton, General Curator at Seneca Park Zoo, has been involved in otter conservation for decades. David is a leading expert on North American river otters and has been the studbook keeper for the Association of Zoos and Aquariums North American river otter SSP (Species Survival Plans®) and Small Carnivore TAG for more than 25 years. An Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) Taxon Advisory Group (TAG) focuses on understanding the conservation and care needs of specific groups of animals. They provide advice on how to manage and protect these animals in zoos, aquariums, and in their natural range. Think of it as Match.com for otters.

Each TAG helps plan and monitor programs that support animal populations and conservation efforts. They work with the Animal Population Management (APM) Committee and oversee programs like Species Survival Plans® (SSP) and Studbooks, which track animal populations. TAGs also collaborate with other organizations around the world to promote and support animal conservation and research.

The purpose of an Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) Regional Studbook is to document the genetics and entire demographic history of each animal within a managed population among AZA member institutions. These collective histories, compiled and maintained by AZA Regional Studbook Keeper, like David, are known as the population's genetic and demographic identity and are valuable tools to track and manage populations. The current North American river otter studbook was started by Hamilton in 1999, and otter populations can be traced back to the 1880s. Historically done on paper, studbooks are now modernized and use software to manage.

The goal of all this work is to ensure that the population of North American river otters in AZA zoos is genetically and demographically diverse. This is extremely important to guarantee a strong future for the species. To put it simply, if all otters shared the same genetics they are essentially copies or close to copies of

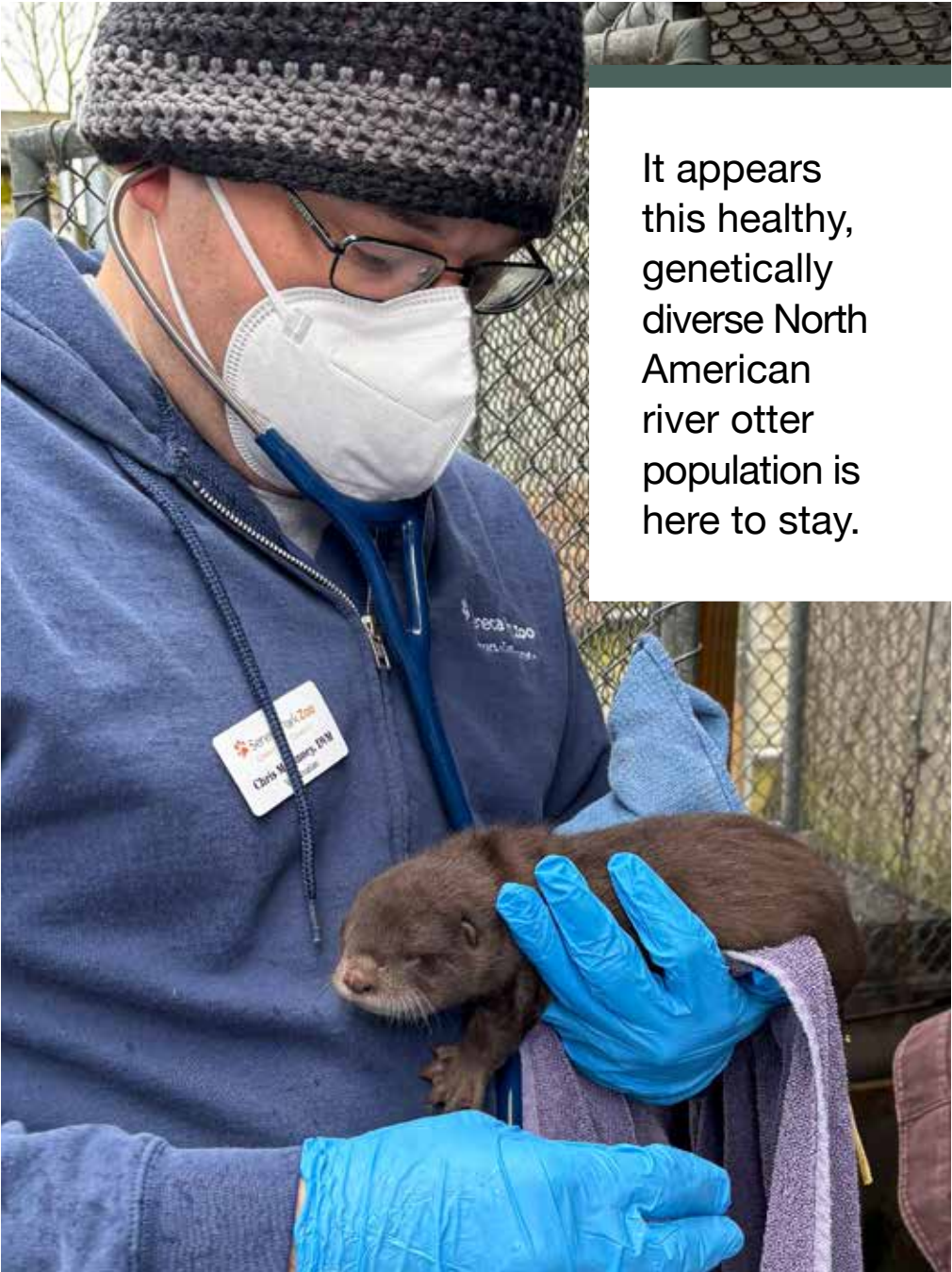


themselves. And if those genes carried traits that were not advantageous, such as poor eyesight or susceptibility to a virus, all those otters would then have the same physiological adaptations, putting the entire population at risk.

So how do we determine that the otters that were reintroduced to Western New York are genetically diverse and not related? Their genomes are sequenced. When the River Otter Project was active in the mid-nineties, genetic testing was wildly expensive and took years, making it out-of-reach for most zoos and conservation organizations. When the 280 otters from the Adirondacks and the Catskills were relocated to Western New York, scientists were hopeful the population had enough genetic diversity to create a healthy and population.

In the following two decades, genetic testing costs plummeted, and sequencing could be completed in days if not hours, making sequencing accessible to conservation organizations and academic institutions. In late 2018, David Hamilton, along with Larry Buckley, RIT Senior Associate Dean, College of Science, set out to determine the genetic diversity of the North American river otter populations in Western New York and throughout AZA zoos. For Western New York, otter DNA was taken from road carrion, bycatch, and conservation capture, and then sequenced. What we learned is that the population is quite diverse, even thirty years after reintroduction. This is likely the third generation of otters who originally came from those 280 reintroduced to our region.

Hamilton and Buckley's work recently expanded to include multiple natural ranges and AZA zoo locations across the country. It appears this healthy, genetically diverse North American river otter population is here to stay.



It appears this healthy, genetically diverse North American river otter population is here to stay.







## Otter spotting: Did I see an otter, and how do I report it?

North American river otter can be confused with muskrats, fishers, and other aquatic animals. The following characteristics can help identify otters.

### Otter Characteristics

**Size:** 3-4' long with tail, which makes up around 1/3 of an otter's length.  
10-30 pounds

**Appearance:** Shiny, dark brown fur

**Tracks:** 3' wide and round. In the winter, you may see 6" troughs where otters slide through the snow into water.

**Scat:** Otters choose an obvious location, such as a rock or outcropping of land for their toilet site. Look for large collections of scat in such areas.

### Location

Otters are aquatic animals, spending most of the time on the shores of ponds, lakes, and rivers.

### Reporting Sightings

One of the ways that Seneca Park Zoo learns more about river otter populations is by asking the public to report their sightings. These observations help biologists, conservation organizations, and researchers gain a deeper understanding of otter behavior and their habitats across the state. Sightings from urban and suburban areas are especially valuable since most research efforts focus on more natural environments.

If you think you spot an otter report it here: [senecaparkzoo.org/ottersighting](https://senecaparkzoo.org/ottersighting)

# Become a Zoo Sustainer!

**Conserve wildlife and wild places all year round** - become a Zoo Sustainer. By signing up to make a monthly donation, you're making a difference for our environment and helping hundreds of thousands of people learn to take action and save animals and habitats. Saving nature can't go on pause. Your monthly donation keeps this vital work going every single day.

We need your help!



## LEARN MORE

[senecaparkzoo.org/zoosustainer](https://senecaparkzoo.org/zoosustainer)



# Introducing the Seneca Park Zoo Travel Program

Seneca Park Zoo is excited to announce a new travel program. The expeditions take participants on unforgettable journeys to some of the most beautiful and biodiverse locations in the world. Two trips are planned for 2026; Monarch Butterfly Migration in Mexico and The Best of Madagascar. These two journeys, rooted in the conservation efforts of the Seneca Park Zoo Society, are truly once in a lifetime experiences. These are more than just trips—they are an opportunity to connect with nature, support conservation, and experience the magic of our world in a truly meaningful way.

## Monarch Butterfly Migration in Mexico

This once-in-a-lifetime safari offers an opportunity to experience the breathtaking spectacle of millions of monarchs as they gather in the mountains of Michoacán. Each winter, these remarkable creatures embark on a 3,000-mile journey from Canada to Mexico, where they congregate in the oyamel fir forests. The sight of these delicate butterflies filling the sky and clustering in the trees is a profound reminder of nature's beauty and resilience.

Our expedition will be led by expert guides who will not only take us to the heart of the migration but also share insights into the Monarchs' lifecycle, the environmental challenges they face, and the conservation efforts that are vital to their survival. As advocates for wildlife conservation, we at the Seneca Park Zoo Society are committed to protecting species like the monarch butterfly, and this safari embodies that mission.

## Madagascar

This immersive safari will take you deep into one of the most biodiverse and unique destinations on Earth. From lush rainforests to striking coastlines, you will experience firsthand the extraordinary wildlife, breathtaking landscapes, and inspiring conservation efforts that make Madagascar so special.

Your adventure begins in the capital city of Antananarivo, where you'll explore its rich history before venturing to Nosy Manga, a small island sanctuary teeming with biodiversity. In Andasibe-Mantadia National Park, guided rainforest walks will bring you face-to-face with Madagascar's famous Indri lemurs, Diademed Sifakas, and Parson's Chameleons, while night walks will reveal the fascinating world of nocturnal wildlife. At Lemur Island, you'll have the opportunity for close-up encounters while learning about vital conservation efforts.

The journey continues south to Ranomafana National Park, home to the rare Golden Bamboo Lemur and Milne-Edwards' Sifaka. Travel west to Morondava, where the legendary Avenue of the Baobabs offers a stunning sunset spectacle and visit Kirindy Forest Reserve, home to the elusive Fossa, before unwinding along Madagascar's scenic coastline.

**Learn more: [senecaparkzoo.org/travel](https://senecaparkzoo.org/travel)**

## MONARCH MIGRATION

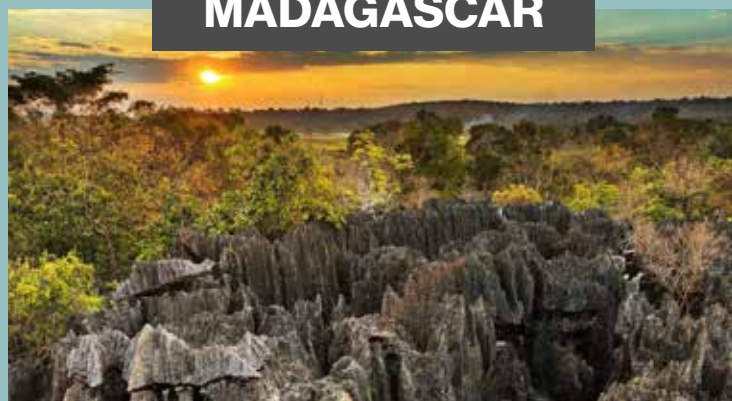


**TRAVEL  
PROGRAM**



Learn More

## MADAGASCAR





# CALENDAR

Mark your calendars for what's next at your Zoo.

## ► MEMBER APPRECIATION WEEK

**AUGUST 2-8**

This week we're celebrating our amazing community of members! Members are the heart of Seneca Park Zoo – they understand the importance of saving wildlife and wild places and share a love of their Zoo.

**Aug 2:** Member Pin Launch

**Aug 3:** Popcorn Day

**Aug 4:** Bring-A-Guest Day

**Aug 5:** Prize-A-Palooza

**Aug 6:** Member-Created Animal Enrichment

**Aug 7:** Scavenger Hunt

**Aug 8:** Member T-Shirt Day

*(Special reward for wearing your shirt; save \$2 on purchase.)*

**Dates:** August 2-8

**Learn More:** [senecaparkzoo.org/memberweek](http://senecaparkzoo.org/memberweek)



## ► MEMBER BRING-A-GUEST WEEKEND

**JULY 4-6**

July 4-6, we're giving our members the opportunity to share their love of wildlife and conservation with friends and family! This Saturday and Sunday, Zoo members can bring one guest for free to experience the Zoo alongside them.

**Dates:** July 4-6

**Learn More:** [senecaparkzoo.org/guestweekend](http://senecaparkzoo.org/guestweekend)





# EDUCATION

## ► KINDERZOO

### CHECK WEBSITE FOR DETAILS

KinderZoo is a program for preschoolers to play, discover & learn in a fun, interactive way.

**Ages:** 18 months – 3 years & 3 - 5 years

**Dates:** See website to check availability & register

**Register:** [senecaparkzoo.org/kinderzoo](http://senecaparkzoo.org/kinderzoo)



# CONSERVATION

## ► COMMUNITY CLEANUPS

**MAY 31/JUNE 21/JULY 5/AUGUST 23**

Join like-minded neighbors to help clean-up our local green spaces. You'll be amazed at the impact you can make in just three hours. All ages are welcome to attend. Keep an eye on our website as more dates are posted!

**Dates:**

Maplewood Rose Garden – May 31 (250 Maplewood Ave)

Seth Green Park – June 21 (Seth Green Dr)

Genesee Gateway Park – July 5 (151 Mt Hope Ave)

West River Walk – August 23 (Parking: 46 Cornhill Pl)

**Register:** [senecaparkzoo.org/cleanup](http://senecaparkzoo.org/cleanup)





## ► RISE & SHINE CART TOURS

**MAY 3, 4 & 18/JUNE 1, 22 & 28/  
JULY 6 & 26/AUGUST 2, 10, 24 & 30/  
SEPTEMBER 7, 13, 14 & 27**

Come wake up with the zoo for a guided golf cart tour and experience the zoo as the animals are starting their day.

**Dates:** 5/3, 5/4, 5/18, 6/1, 6/22, 6/28, 7/6, 7/26, 8/2, 8/10, 8/24, 8/30, 9/7, 9/13, 9/14, 9/27

**Learn More:** [senecaparkzoo.org/riseandshine](http://senecaparkzoo.org/riseandshine)



## ► ENDANGERED SPECIES WEEKEND

**MAY 24 & 25**

In honor of the various species in our care that are endangered, we are celebrating Endangered Species Awareness Weekend this year! We will be raising awareness for animals like polar bears, giraffes, penguins, rhinos, and more on May 24 and 25 here at the Zoo!

**Dates:** May 24-25

**Register:** [senecaparkzoo.org/endangeredspeciesweekend](http://senecaparkzoo.org/endangeredspeciesweekend)



## ► SUMMER PROGRAMMING

**CHECK WEBSITE FOR DETAILS**

Join us for daily animal experiences from Memorial Day to Labor Day! Meet animals up close, observe training sessions, and discover enrichment activities. Schedule details coming soon.

**Learn More:** [senecaparkzoo.org](http://senecaparkzoo.org)





## ▶ WORLD GIRAFFE DAY

**JUNE 21**

Join us on Saturday, June 21 for World Giraffe Day! Learn more about the world's tallest land mammal and celebrate giraffes at Seneca Park Zoo.

**Dates:** June 21

**Learn More:** [senecaparkzoo.org/giraffeday](https://senecaparkzoo.org/giraffeday)



## ▶ OCEANS WEEKEND

**JULY 12 & 13**

Join us in celebrating and supporting oceans and aquatic life on July 12 and 13 with our Ocean Conservation Weekend here at the Zoo!

**Date:** July 12-13

**Learn More:** [senecaparkzoo.org/oceanweekend](https://senecaparkzoo.org/oceanweekend)



## ▶ GENESEE RIVER WEEKEND

**JULY 26 & 27**

Join us for Genesee Trail Awareness Weekend on July 26-27! This weekend, dive into the wonders of our local trails and waterways with engaging activities and educational opportunities for all ages!

**Date:** July 26-27

**Learn More:** [senecaparkzoo.org/geneseeweekend](https://senecaparkzoo.org/geneseeweekend)



## ► GOLDEN FROG DAY

**AUGUST 16**

In honor of the magnificent Panamanian Golden Frogs, we are thrilled to announce Panamanian Golden Frog Day on August 16! This special event is dedicated to raising awareness and funds for crucial conservation efforts to protect these unique and endangered amphibians.

**Date:** August 16

**Learn More:** [senecaparkzoo.org/goldenfrogday](http://senecaparkzoo.org/goldenfrogday)



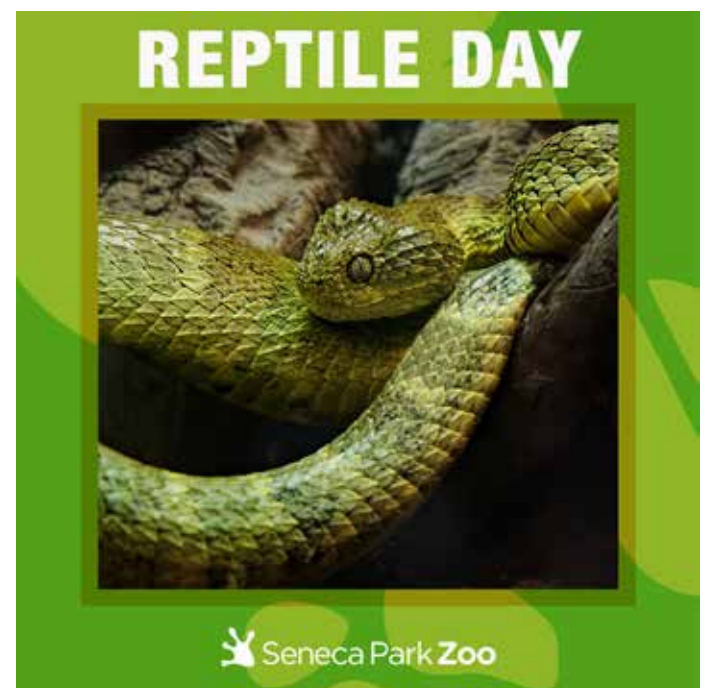
## ► REPTILE DAY

**AUGUST 17**

Do you have a passion for some of the scaly species? This is the weekend for you! Reptile Weekend is dedicated to the lizards, snakes, and other animals of those species in our care here at the Zoo.

**Dates:** August 17

**Learn More:** [senecaparkzoo.org/event/reptile-day](http://senecaparkzoo.org/event/reptile-day)



## ► PACHYDERM WEEKEND

**SEPTEMBER 20 & 21**

Join us for Pachyderm Weekend at Seneca Park Zoo on September 20-21 and celebrate Earth's giants—elephants and rhinos! Enjoy special keeper chats, interactive experiences, and memorable moments highlighting the conservation of these incredible species.

**Dates:** September 20-21

**Learn More:** [senecaparkzoo.org/pachyderm](http://senecaparkzoo.org/pachyderm)





# EVENTS

## ► ZOOBREW HAPPY HOUR

**JUNE 20/JULY 11/AUGUST 15/SEPTEMBER 5**

Drink beer and save elephants! Spend an evening outdoors at the Seneca Park Zoo with a drink in hand at ZooBrew! Enjoy great live music, delicious food and drink, and animal experiences at this afterhours event exclusively for adults 21+.

### **NEW ZooBrew Season Pass!**

New for ZooBrew 2025, the ZooBrew Season Pass gives you entry into each of four ZooBrew events. Just scan your pass at the gate and you're in for our June, July, August, and September dates.

**Dates:** June 20, July 11, August 15, September 5

**General Tickets:** \$15 in advance/\$12 for members/\$20 at the door!

**VIP Tickets:** \$60 advance only, limited tickets available!

**Season Pass:** \$50 online only!

**Learn More:** [senecaparkzoo.org/zoobrew](https://senecaparkzoo.org/zoobrew)



## ► JUNGLE JOG 5K

**JULY 20**

Gather your herd and join us for our annual Jungle Jog 5k! Run, walk, or stroll through Seneca Park and behind the scenes of the Zoo for a wild race. Become a “Fierce Fundraiser” to win exclusive prizes and support your Zoo’s education and conservation programs. 2025 featured animal: North American River Otter

**Date:** July 20

**Learn More:** [senecaparkzoo.org/junglejog](https://senecaparkzoo.org/junglejog)



## ► WINE FOR WILDLIFE

**SEPTEMBER 26**

Raise a glass to sustainable, environmentally-friendly wines from regional and international wineries. Talk with winemakers and learn how thoughtful wine production positively impacts our ecosystem

**Dates:** September 26

**Learn More:** [senecaparkzoo.org/wineforwildlife](https://senecaparkzoo.org/wineforwildlife)

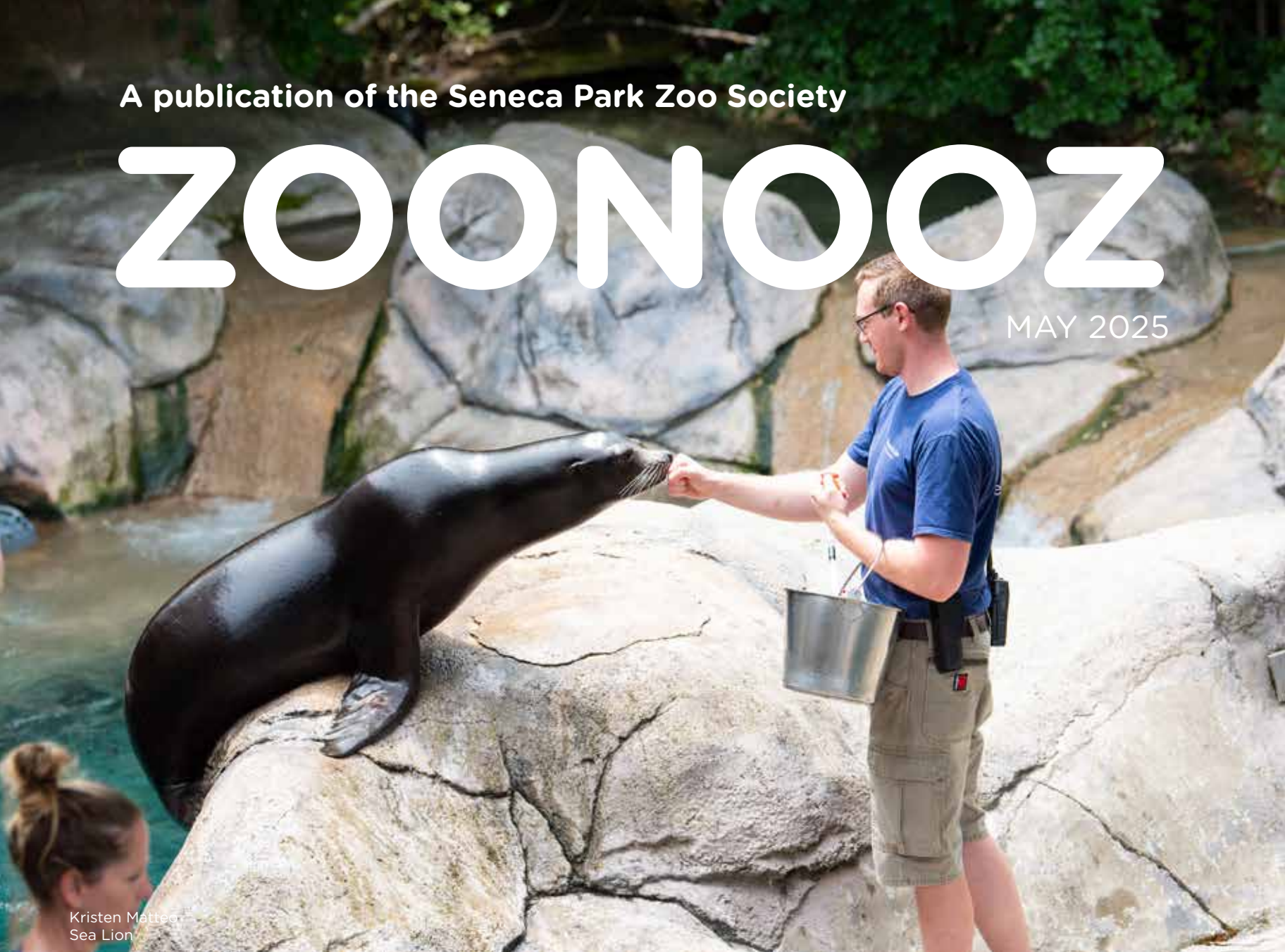




A publication of the Seneca Park Zoo Society

# ZOONOOZ

MAY 2025



Kristen Matteo  
Sea Lion

## Seneca Park Zoo Society

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When you're finished, please share it with a friend.

**Designer:** Amanda Lindley

### Contributing writers:

Pamela Reed Sanchez, President and CEO, Seneca Park Zoo Society  
Beth LaPierre, Director of Communications and Engagement  
Chandler Scott, Communications Coordinator

Internationally, and in our own backyard, Seneca Park Zoo plays a key role in species survival. Chartered as an educational institution in 1957 by New York State, the Seneca Park Zoo Society plays an integral role in supporting Monroe County, the owners and operators of the Zoo. Together, we are working to bring animals back from the brink of extinction.

**[senecaparkzoo.org](http://senecaparkzoo.org) | 585.336.7200 | The Zoo is open 362 days a year.**



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