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A Day at the Zoo

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As a parent, I want my children to have an appreciation and respect for the environment and the natural life that exists in balance with it. Exposing them to new flowers, trees, and bugs in our neighborhood is a good start toward developing this connection. Another great way to help establish familiarity with and concern for wildlife is by visiting the zoo. And it's closer than you might think.

The Navajo Nation Zoo in Window Rock, Arizona is just twenty-five miles from Gallup. It's unique in that it's the only tribal zoo in the country. It was created to conserve and protect the Navajo Nation's plants and animals as well as their relationship to Navajo culture. In fact, all but two of the Zoo's animal species are native to Navajoland.

Its animals are almost all victims of injury or domestication. For example, B.J. the bobcat was found as a kitten in the wild and raised in a family's home. Because B.J. quickly lost the instinct to hunt, he could no longer survive in the wild. So, the zoo provides a safe home. We also went into a small enclosure separated from the other birds while an eagle, new to the Zoo, was fed. This eagle was shot and sustained severe injuries to one of its wings, which had to be amputated. Without the ability to fly, the eagle will continue to live in the Zoo's sanctuary.

The Zoo isn't big, but it's really the perfect size for our family. Our 3-year-old can run ahead and easily

stay within sight and we don't get tired of carting our 8-month-old around, nor did he tire and become fussy. The animals' habitats are close to the path and in this intimate setting, every visit is a little bit different. Once, we saw one of the bears stand on its hind legs and scratch its back against the fence. Another time, the albino raccoon was awake and climbed right up to the front of its habitat to check us out.

On our most recent visit to the zoo, we had arranged for a tour with the zoo's curator, Matthew Holdgate. He has been at the zoo for about a year-and-a-half and has been working to improve its exhibits and encourage more visitors. Recently, the staff completed renovations to the Discovery Center and hosted its second annual ZooFest, which drew 6,000 people to the zoo for free activities and entertainment. Twice as many people came out this year as last, and the hope is that a portion of those in attendance will continue to support the zoo through donations and participation in the Friends of the Zoo and Adopt-an-Animal programs. Improvements to the Native Plant Garden, to the exhibits' signs, and to the educational programs are also underway, but with a small staff and a fixed budget, it will be slow-going.

Now, back to the tour. We started with my husband's favorite animal, B.J. the bobcat. For some reason, the animals were particularly active on this day. The wolves were high up on the rocks, almost out of sight, but the cougar and the bears were front and center, waiting for their food. Matthew opened the fence to the bears' enclosure and threw a frozen hunk to the more dominant of the two females. While she was distracted, he hurled another hunk toward the other bear. He explained that if not for this feeding technique, one of the bears would eat all the food. Clearly, these animals have personalities and habits, which the Zoo's staff has picked up on.

Our tour continued past the skunks, coyotes, and elk. When we arrived at the porcupines, Holdgate had some carrot and apple snacks prepared. Typically, school groups on a tour like this would stop for a hands-on lesson about porcupines' quills. Do you know how far a porcupine can throw its quills? I have to admit that I was stumped by this question and learned something new. You can find out, too, when you meet Spike and Barb on your next trip to the Zoo!

The eagles are a favorite at the Zoo, but as it started to rain, we moved past their habitats and ended our tour in the Discovery Center. Inside we could see insects, reptiles, fish, and rodents in their newly remodeled exhibits. We also got the chance to handle several animals including a lizard, a turtle, a frog, a snake and a four-week-old prairie dog.

We had a great time! And while it's always fun to go at our own pace, I appreciated the tour this time around and learned a lot. I know that our daughter won't quickly forget what a frog felt like in her hands or how sharp Spike the porcupine's quills were. The more often we return to the Zoo, the more she'll learn and the more excited she'll be about caring for the animals, both at the Zoo and in the wild.

The Navajo Nation Zoo is located in Window Rock, Arizona. It is open Monday - Saturday, 10 AM - 5 PM. Admission is FREE; donations are encouraged.