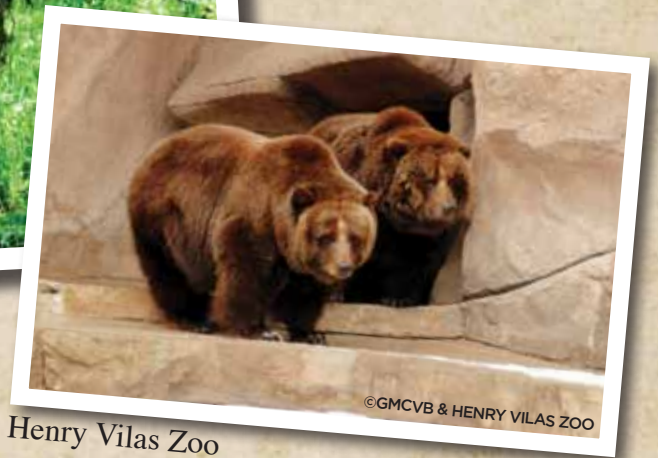




The Milwaukee County Zoo
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Henry Vilas Zoo
©GMCVB & HENRY VILAS ZOO

A WALK ON THE WILD SIDE

Meet some of Wisconsin's more unusual residents

By Lisa Schmelz

Wisconsin is famous for its millions of undeveloped acres, where nature lovers can get close to all sorts of creatures great and small. But what if you could get even closer to some of your favorite animals – even those not native to North America? Well, you can. In every direction, Wisconsin parks, zoos and sanctuaries offer terrific experiences for animal lovers of all ages. We checked out a few of them.

SANCTUARIES

Valley of the Kings Sanctuary & Retreat, Sharon

Founded in 1973 by Jill Carnegie as a haven for two Bengal tigers whose owner could no longer handle them, Valley of the Kings is located in rural Sharon just over the Illinois border. A private, non-profit exotic animal sanctuary, it serves as a final home for animals from zoos, circuses, roadside attractions and humans who learned the hard way that exotic animals are not pets.

Literally a last chance for lions, tigers, leopards and cougars, the facility is also home to other animals in need of shelter. Bears, fox, horses and even a few cows all live here – and not as food sources for the big cats.

“It’s a very special place,” says Carnegie. “It’s not like a zoo or a private collector. These are all animals that have been dealt very bad cards in life and we’ve been able to turn them around.”

The facility runs mostly on private donations and offers winter tours for members. Membership must be purchased in advance of tours and cannot be obtained at the gate. Tours are not available to the general public. A family membership is \$75 for six months. Individual memberships are \$60 for six months or \$30 for those 65 and older. votk.org

Bay Beach Wildlife Sanctuary, Green Bay

Head 180 miles north from Valley of the Kings to Green Bay and you'll discover Bay Beach Wildlife Sanctuary. A beautiful 700-acre urban wildlife refuge, featuring live animal exhibits, educational displays, miles of hiking and skiing trails, and various wildlife viewing opportunities, it is Green Bay's largest park. More than 4,500 orphaned and injured animals are treated here annually. It is Wisconsin's second largest wildlife rehabilitative program, bested only by the statewide reach of the Wisconsin Humane Society.

"We're a free park and we're open year-round, 365 days a year," says spokesman Mike Reed. "We have educational programs and a live zoo with native animals and there's no admission fee." baybeach-wildlife.com

Raptor Education Group, Inc., Antigo

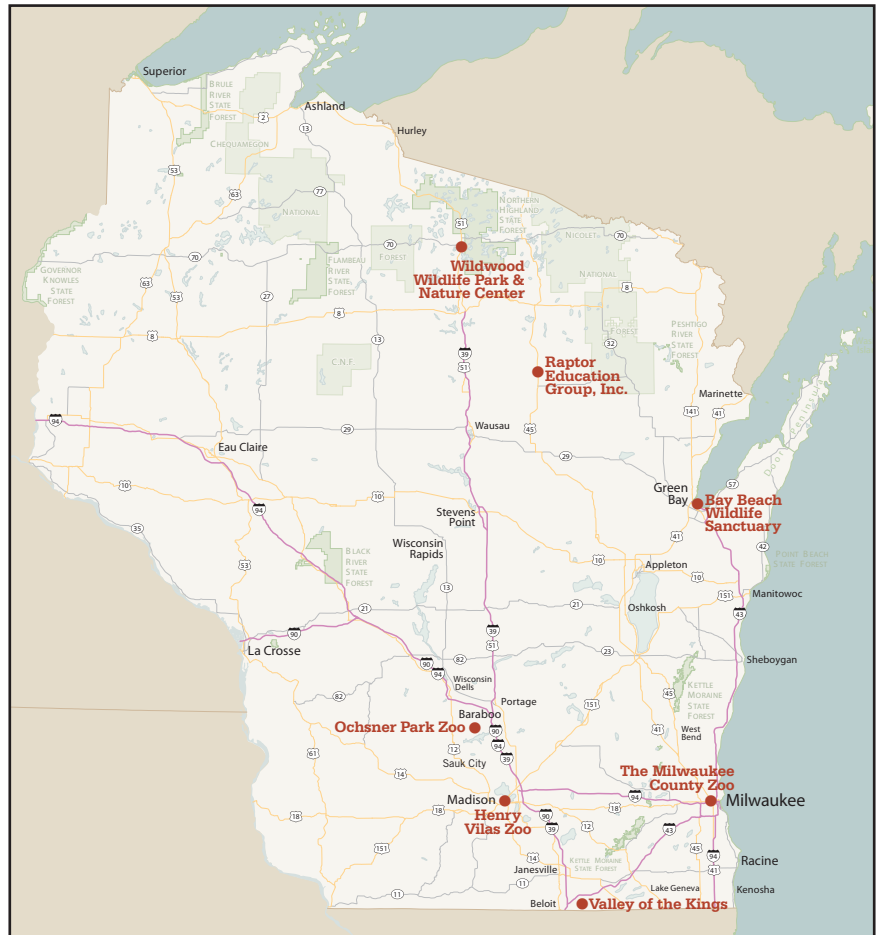
In between Valley of the Kings and Bay Beach Wildlife Sanctuary – and along the Wisconsin River – the Raptor Education Group is tending to injured, ill or orphaned birds native to Wisconsin. Their release of eagles each winter draws thousands of people to Sauk City and the banks of the Wisconsin River.

"The winter is the best time to do the eagle release because we don't have to worry about the birds getting territorial as it's not a breeding time," explains Molly McKay, the group's director of education.

The nonprofit, which also offers an array of educational programs, was founded in 1990.

Release is always the purpose of its work and the ultimate payoff. "It's a hard field to be in emotionally," says McKay, "and the releases really keep us going and help us remember what we're in this for."

Eagle release dates are always dependent on a raptor's progress, health and ability to survive. Check the group's website frequently for 2013's "Eagle Days" dates, which are free and open to the public, and for other winter educational opportunities. Tours of the group's facility in Antigo resume in June and continue through August, and have a nominal fee. raptoreducationgroup.org

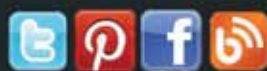


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NATURE PARKS & ZOOS

Wildwood Wildlife Park & Nature Center, Minocqua

Home to over 750 mammals, reptiles and birds, this Northwoods park is a family favorite generation after generation. Wildwood got its start in 1957 when Jim Peck purchased land on the then-outskirts of Minocqua. Two years later, an injured fawn became the park's first resident.

The park's petting zoo is loved by children from all over the Midwest. Special feeding programs for bears, birds and fish, along with educational shows, provide a true hands-on encounter.

Wildwood Wildlife Park & Nature Center is open daily from 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. through Oct. 14. The season resumes in late April. Admission fees and other info can be found on its website. wildwoodwildlifepark.com



Ochsner Park Zoo, Baraboo

Less than an hour northwest of Madison is the Ochsner Park Zoo. What it lacks in size it makes up for in experience. A true city zoo, admission here is free and the encounter opportunities are more intimate.

"We're one of the smaller zoos, and we're only a couple of acres," says Mike Hardy, the city's park, recreation and forestry director. "But the comment we get a lot is that there are really very few zoos that let you get this close to the animals. It's more of a personal experience."

Over 15 species and 40 animals are housed here, including two very popular black bears. Berryboo and Bugaboo have been with the zoo for eight years, says Hardy. Berryboo ran into mischief and was relocated here by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. Bugaboo came from another zoo.

The Ochsner Park Zoo is located within a 26-acre park and is ideal for picnics and large group outings. Three shelters and grills are also available. Kids enjoy a large playground area and the whole family can also access the Baraboo Riverwalk from here. The zoo is open year-round from dusk to dawn. cityofbaraboo.com (enter zoo in the search bar)



Henry Vilas Zoo, Madison

The land for what is now Madison's Henry Vilas Zoo was donated in 1904 by Colonel William F. and Anna M. Vilas "for the uses and purposes of a public park and pleasure ground." It is named for their young son, who died from diabetes. In 1911, the first animal exhibit was created here. In keeping with the Vilas family's stipulation that the park admission always be free, no ticket is needed.

Dubbed the "best free place for families" in Madison, the zoo is now operated by Dane County. Primates, big cats and a tropical rain forest aviary are all big

draws. But also getting their due are invertebrates like hissing cockroaches and giant millipedes.

"On a day like today, when it's just beautiful out, it's just packed here. People love it," says Karen Berendes, the zoo's office clerk.

The zoo is located along the shore of Lake Wingra and adjacent to Vilas Park, a great place for picnicking. It is open year-round from 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. The zoo's buildings are open from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Parking is free. vilaszoo.org



The Milwaukee County Zoo, Milwaukee

The Milwaukee County Zoo is the state's largest and is set on over 200 park-like acres. Mammals, birds, fish, amphibians and reptiles can be viewed in naturalistic exhibits. Open year-round, snow doesn't stop this zoo from being a happening place.

"Any of the warm-weather animals have indoor quarters that they can be seen from," explains spokeswoman Laura Pedriani. "Big cats, pachyderms, primates, they can all still be seen even in winter."

Surprisingly, adds Pedriani, the camels handle the cold pretty well.

"They're perfectly fine. Like most of our animals that can remain outside in winter," she says, "they have shelters they can go into when they want. We just need to keep their grounds safe so they don't twist a hoof or ankle on the snow or ice." milwaukeezoo.org [ew](#)



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