

## Racine Zoo Greet Visitors With New Parrot Exhibit

### Yellow-crowned Amazon parrots featured in Wisconsin zoo's latest display

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As part of phase three of its "Gateway to Adventure" vision, Wisconsin's Racine Zoo is building a new parrot exhibit scheduled to open July 17, 2008.

The nearly 700-square-foot exhibit, attached to the corner of the gift shop near the zoo's entrance, will feature two yellow-crowned Amazon parrots, Buster and Abby.

"One of the things we were sensitive to in designing the new entrance was a criticism we heard of zoo entrances -- how long it can be between getting out of your car and actually seeing your first animal," said Jay Christie, president and CEO of the zoo. "We've got a position that once you get in the gate, as soon as you buy your ticket you are face to face with these two charismatic South American birds."

The new facility, designed specifically for this bird species, will give the two yellow-crowned Amazon parrots living conditions that are up to par with the rest of the zoo. The exhibit has an indoor-outdoor component so the birds can choose whether they want to be inside or outside.

"The parrots were the only animals at the zoo that had to be physically moved from their summertime residence to their wintertime residence," Christie explained.

Zoo guests can view the interior portion of the parrot exhibit from the new gift shop, which is scheduled to open on the same date. A glass wall separates humans from the parrots, but according to Beth Rich, the zoo's animal care supervisor, a ventilation opening above the barrier provides good air circulation for the birds, and it allows the guests and the birds to hear one another.

"Guests now can't get as close as they will be able to in the new exhibit," Rich said. "I definitely think that people will be able to talk to them and be drawn to them much more than they are now."

Both Amazon parrots have high vocal capacities, Rich said. Although Buster tends to be more outgoing and curious, using phrases such as "Whachya doin'?" and "Hi Abby," the reserved Abby will open up over time and has a really good wolf whistle.

Each also connects individually with guests to the zoo. One of Rich's favorite memories of Buster is his interaction with a 9-year-old boy. In the current facility, the parrots sit above the visitors, but Buster became fixated on the boy and jumped to the ground where he could talk to the boy and follow him back and forth.

"I think that made [the boy's] day. He had a connection with one of the animals, which at a zoo, is something that the public really likes to have happen," Rich said. "They like it when the animal makes eye contact with them and that they have that connection. Parrots are really good for that."

The outdoor portion of the exhibit, while not quite finished, will have a perch for the Amazon parrots designed for their smaller feet, Rich said. Christie added that the area lends itself to doing interesting things with the landscaping. He envisions a lush look with subtropical installations.

As of now, the zoo has no plans of adding more birds to the exhibit. The only other parrot the zoo owns is a white umbrella cockatoo named Miranda. Miranda is featured in educational programming but is not on exhibit. At this time, the new facility does not cater to the personality of cockatoos, which like to walk on the ground and tend to bite things. She said they would have to modify the safety enclosures if they decided to add Miranda or another bird to the exhibit.

Buster and Abby participate in educational programming along with Miranda. According to Rich, they bring to life the message of parrots.



“They are really good animal ambassadors for the plight of all the parrots that are living in highly impacted habitats all throughout the world, particularly in South America,” Rich said. “And they also are really good ambassadors for the pet trade. Nine out of 10 parrots that get smuggled in don’t make it, and so if you are interested in purchasing a bird like Buster and Abby, make sure you purchase it from a reputable breeder who did not import the birds.”

Accompanying the opening of the parrot exhibit in July, the zoo will also open an interactive Australian exhibit and discovery center as part of the \$2 million “Gateway to Adventure” project.

For the Racine Zoo’s hours of operation and ticket information, visit the zoo’s website.