



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE | Monday, September 29, 2025

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New chapter of Virginia Zoo history begins with a new Executive Director and prestigious accreditation from the Association of Zoos and Aquariums

NORFOLK, VA - September has been an eventful month at the Virginia Zoo with pivotal developments marking a transformative new chapter ahead in the Zoo's history.

On September 13th, during the annual Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) conference in Tampa, Florida, the Virginia Zoo was granted the prestigious honor of accreditation by AZA through September 2029. This marks the Zoo's 38th consecutive year of receiving this "gold standard" in zoological and aquarium accreditation. Out of about 2,800 animal facilities licensed by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), fewer than 10% achieve this esteemed accreditation. *(See attached release from AZA for additional information on the accreditation process and organization.)*

"An accreditation credential is only as valuable as the process and organization behind it," said Dan Ashe, president and CEO of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums. "AZA accreditation, the global gold standard for modern aquariums and zoos, reflects decades of progress through science, experience, and a persistent commitment to fostering environments where animals thrive, visitors benefit, and wildlife and wild spaces are conserved. We applaud the dedicated leadership and staff at each of these facilities, as they represent some of the best zoos and aquariums around the globe."

Following this honor, the Virginia Zoo and City of Norfolk are thrilled to have officially welcomed the new Executive Director of the Virginia Zoo, Chris Jenkins, who started on September 15th. Bringing over 25 years of frontline animal care and training experience, Chris comes from Natural Encounters, Inc., where he served as the organization's Chief Operating Officer (COO). Natural Encounters, Inc. is a national leader in animal training, presentation, consultation, exhibition, and education. Prior to this role, he served as the Education Programs Presenter at the Walt Disney Company, where he facilitated several tour programs at Disney's Animal Kingdom. Chris also served as a Park Operations Host at SeaWorld San Diego, where he provided guest and concierge services and assistance throughout the park, coordinated pre-show announcements, and maintained upkeep of all animal exhibits.

Chris holds an Associate of Science Degree in Animal Behavior, Wildlife Education and Exotic Animal Training and Management from Moorpark College, and a Bachelor of Arts with Honors in Psychology from the University of California, Davis. He is a member of the Board of Directors



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for the Animal Behavior Management Alliance (AMBA) and a member of the Professional Development

Committees for both the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) and the International Association of Avian Trainers and Educators (IAATE).

[Insert quote from Chris about joining the Virginia Zoo]

In addition to receiving the honor of AZA Accreditation and Chris joining the team, the Virginia Zoo is gearing up for an impressive year ahead. Next year marks the Zoo's 125th Anniversary, to be celebrated with an entire year of special programming, events, gifts, giveaways, and more provided for guests and our Norfolk community. Highlights will include a limited edition Zoo Trading Card program, historical displays throughout the park, throwback Zoodoptions celebrating former zoo animal residents, a 125th Anniversary event, and more!

Construction on the Zoo's capital campaign project, the Edventure & Exploration Campus, is well underway, and the building is scheduled for its debut opening in late 2026.

[Insert quote from City of Norfolk representative about upcoming future of the zoo].

Stay tuned on the Virginia Zoo's website and social media channels (Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn @VirginiaZoo) for more detailed releases about upcoming developments, and mark your calendar for a year full of fun and learning at the Virginia Zoo in 2026!

About the Virginia Zoo

The Virginia Zoo, located in Norfolk, Virginia, is home to more than 700 exceptional animals representing over 150 fascinating species. Founded in 1901 and residing on 53 beautifully landscaped acres, the Virginia Zoo has demonstrated a commitment to saving and protecting the world's wildlife by inspiring a passion for nature and taking conservation action at home and around the world. The Virginia Zoo is an accredited member of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums and is recognized as a global leader in education, recreation, science, wildlife conservation, and animal care and welfare. For more than a century, the Zoo has connected adults, families, and school children with the natural world and its wildlife. The Virginia Zoo is open daily from 9:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. with last admission at 3 p.m. For admission prices and to learn more, visit virginiazoo.org.



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