



April 5, 2019
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Dane County's Henry Vilas Zoo Welcomes Two African Penguin Chicks

Dane County's Henry Vilas Zoo is proud to announce the newest members of its family. African penguin chicks Robben and Dassen hatched three days apart, on December 30 and January 2. The chicks now have their juvenile waterproof feathers in. They will get their first of many swimming lessons by keeper staff in the coming week. Once they learn to swim, Robben and Dassen will be introduced to the other penguins in the zoo's colony and make their debut to the public.

"We are so excited to have Robben and Dassen as the newest additions to the Henry Vilas Zoo," said Dane County Executive Joe Parisi. "We take pride in our education and conservation efforts at the zoo to save endangered species. A huge thank you goes out to our staff for their commitment to keeping these penguin chicks healthy."

Newly hatched African penguins fledge for about 90 days and have an inborn fear of water. While they are in their soft fluffy down feather coat, they have no protection from the elements and cold water can give them hypothermia. As the chicks grow, they start to lose their baby fuzz and get their adult plumage in. They can learn to swim once they develop their waterproof coat.

Robben and Dassen are the seventh and eighth chicks of their parents, who are a Species Survival Plan (SSP) recommended breeding pair. SSP programs are developed by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) to oversee the population management of select species and enhance conservation of species in the wild. Thanks to its AZA accreditation, the Henry Vilas Zoo is able to participate in SSP programs and help preserve the population of endangered species like the African penguin.

"Dane County's Henry Vilas Zoo has a long history working with the African Penguin SSP and contributing to penguin conservation efforts," said Zoo Director Ronda Schwetz. "Thanks to our passionate and talented animal staff, this commitment will continue for years to come and I couldn't be more proud to work with such talented and amazing animal care experts."

While Robben and Dassen were hatching at the Henry Vilas Zoo, Lead Zoo Keeper Gary Hartlage was on his way to work with penguins in South Africa. Hartlage assisted the Southern African Foundation for the Conservation of Coastal Birds (SANCCOB) hand rear abandoned African penguin chicks. Since its inception, the group has successfully released more than 4,000 chicks back into the wild. Robben and Dassen are named after islands in South Africa with active penguin breeding colonies.

Those interested in seeing the Henry Vilas Zoo's African penguin colony and many other species can do so on "Kids Day," taking place tomorrow (April 6). All day long, carousel and train rides will be free at the zoo. Kids 12 and under will also be able to get one free hotdog and ice cream treat at the Glacier Grille.

A full list of activities taking place on "Kids Day" at the Henry Vilas Zoo include:

10:00 AM—Orangutan Keeper Chat

10:00 AM to 3:00PM—Discovery Cart (taking place by the Big Cats)

10:30 AM, 11:00AM, & 11:30AM—Teddy Bear Story Time (taking place by the bear exhibits)

11:00 AM—Otter Feeding

12:00 PM—Polar Bear Keeper Chat

12:30 PM to 3:00 PM—Sensory Play Activities (taking place at the Animal Health Center)

1:00 PM—Live Animal Program (taking place at the Education Pavilion)

2:00PM—Seal Feeding

Later in the month, the zoo will celebrate "Party for the Planet." This commemoration of the zoo's conservation work will take place on April 27. In addition to seedling giveaways, tree climbs and games, there will be a solar presentation by Madison Gas and Electric, electric vehicles, and other Earth friendly educational displays designed to call attention for steps everyone can take to reduce carbon emissions and improve the health of our planet.

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