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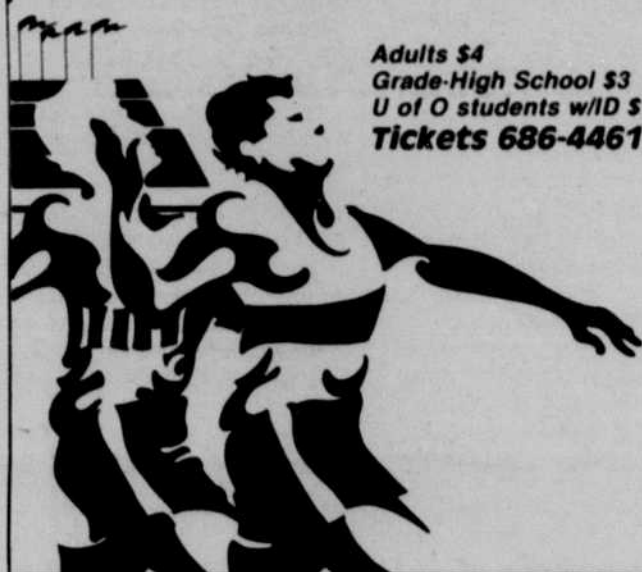
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Photo by Scott Maben

Bob Beisser, founder of the New Zoo, holding his adult black rat snake, native to Northeast America. The snake will join a menagerie of other species at the zoo this weekend.

Eugene 'dreamer' sponsors weekend zoo without cages

By Scott Maben
Of the Emerald

Bob Beisser shares his bedroom-converted office with snakes. He breeds mosquito larvae for live fish food in ten-gallon buckets sitting on his front porch.

For the past few weeks, Beisser, 37, has been concentrating on making plans for the fourth annual New Zoo, a temporary animal exhibit scheduled for its first two-day run this weekend in Eugene and Springfield.

The New Zoo is Beisser's brainstorm. Wanting to educate the community about the world's endangered species with a showcase of mammals and reptiles, Beisser started the zoo in 1984. Its popularity has snowballed since then.

"I'm a big dreamer," he said, gently picking up a caterpillar from his deck bench. "This whole New Zoo thing was just a dream. I met a person with a hawk, I know somebody's who's got a cougar — if you bring them together in one place, it's just like a mini zoo."

What makes the New Zoo unique is that most of the animals are placed face to face with visitors — no bars, no glass, he said.

"We've had birds of prey — hawks, owls, eagles — up on a perch. They're not caged at all," he continued. "We have this giant tortoise that isn't confined whatsoever. It's just out on the grass."

"When possible, we encourage this sort of hands-on contact. It takes a special animal to put up with it, but when you have that connection, I think it touches people's souls," Beisser said.

Guests bringing animals this year include Terri Raines of Eugene, with a 10-month old cougar she led around campus on Thursday; Ann Gordon of Seattle, with a small African cat called a "serval"; and Dan Duel of Bandon, with a hawk and an owl.

The presenters are as much of the zoo's attraction as are the animals, Beisser said.

"These are people who have dedicated their lives to wildlife. They are here to share information," he said.

Other animals scheduled to appear are: a 3-year-old chimpanzee from Washington; a wolf from Wolf Haven in Washington and a wolf pup from Wildlife Safari in Oregon; a giant tortoise, a python and a crocodile from Hart's Reptile World in Canby; and various reptiles and amphibians from the Oregon Herpetological Society.

Coming from the Beisser residence will be a black rat snake and a couple of corn snakes and alligator lizards.

Beisser's interest in animals began while he was growing up on the edge of New Jersey suburbs, he said.

"I was never into sports, so during gym class at school most of the gym teachers let me go climb in trees in the woods rather than stand out in the middle of the baseball field," he said.

The zoo is also a stage for people who are in-

terested in wildlife and conservation to "show a united front," he said.

Beisser contends the number one threat to nature is unawareness.

"We're watching animals become increasingly rare, and I'm just getting impatient. The scientists have been warning us for decades now, and society is not taking notice," he said.

"It's come to the point now where it's either time for people to decide that wildlife is something that we want to have, or wave good-bye," he said.

His solution is simple in design but, as he agrees, is probably impossible: severe reduction of human population growth and expansion of wilderness space.

The population explosion and expansion of development, for instance, is permanently wrecking the rain forests, Beisser said.

"We're basically turning the planet Earth into a desert," Beisser said. "What we're making is one big city where we're going to have a lot of people, a lot of rats and a lot of cockroaches."

The story is the same locally, he said.

Oregon's old-growth trees, which are threatened by logging, are not a renewable resource, in Beisser's opinion.

"You've got trees that are 700 to 1,000 years old. It's going to take 10 human generations to get another tree like that, and chances are it will never happen again," according to Beisser. The old-growth issue will be one of several exhibits at the New Zoo this year, he said.

He criticized proposals to establish tree farms using tree cycling as unnatural and unfeasible in the long haul — an unacceptable trade-off for cutting down the old-growth.

What he finds most frustrating is destruction of wildlife — not out of ignorance but because of "greed and and short-sided profit motivation," he said.

But the blame is shared by all, many conservationists included, Beisser said, citing the example of the California condor, the largest bird in North America, which is down to a population of about 30. All have been placed in captivity, the last just a few weeks ago, for a program that will attempt to reintroduce the bird into the wild some day.

"Had they started that captive breeding program back in the '60s, I think the condor would be in much better shape today," Beisser said.

But the common goal to save the condor has been marred with quarrels on how to go about it, he said.

"And even to this day there are a lot of people who are against the captive breeding program. They're against bringing the wild animal into captivity. Some people say, 'Let it go extinct in the wild. Let it die with dignity.' I just disagree."