

CALL OF THE wild

Wild animal walk-through safari has more than 450 birds and animals

BANDON — Debbie Tramel wouldn't even think about quitting her job.

That would mean giving up the surrogate children she's raised from a bottle — including a twelve-week old black leopard named Black Jack.

"They're all special," Tramel said, as Black Jack bats a playful paw at her face. "How many people can say they're working with an endangered species?"

Tramel is one of nine full-time animal keepers at the West Coast Game Park seven miles south of Bandon on the Oregon Coast. The walk-through safari, home to more than 450 birds and animals, is the largest wild animal petting park in America, said Bob Tenney, park director.

"Our emphasis is hand-raising," Tenney said. "The animals get to know you and they know what you're there for."

Visitors to the game park can pet or film 75 different species on more than 20 natural wooded acres. The game park, which opened 25 years ago as a deer refuge, has expanded to include several endangered species, housing one of only 25 pairs of snow leopards in the world, Tenney said.

What makes the park unique, Tenney said, is it mixes wild animals with species that would otherwise be their enemies, while also building working relationships between people and animals. Animal keepers establish a certain bond of love and trust with each animal. These bonds help park viewers get a closer look at the animals than zoos or drive-through safaris allow.

"We put people closer than they have ever been," Tenney said. "A zoo does not work with animals the way we do."

Park visitors shouldn't be surprised to see a lion and tiger caged together, or a fox and a raccoon sharing the same nursery. Tenney said the park tries raising different species together and sometimes finds that animals can live

harmoniously with their natural enemies.

"What we've accomplished over 25 years I don't think can be repeated," Tenney said. "It's taken us years and years to blend what you see here."

Highlights at the park include a presentation area where visitors can pet Black Jack and other wild animals, a nursery housing small animals and caged areas housing zebras, bears and other larger species. Deer, peacocks, pigmy goats, and llamas are among the several dozen animals roaming the park, pestering guests for food and attention. An elk refuge is also a popular area of the park.

Tramel said park visitors are excited to actually touch and hold the wild animals. Many people say they are envious of her job.

"Most people are enthralled about being able to touch an endangered species," she added.

However, what visitors don't get to see, Tramel said, are times when the animals start feeling their wild instincts. When an animal starts to act up, a keeper is in charge of giving the animal a time out period until it can be trusted with visitors, she said. Some animals aren't displayed for periods of time because of behavior problems.

"You can't tame these guys," Tramel said. "You make them more workable and human-oriented."

West Coast Game Park is open year round with limited winter hours. The



Robby Siefke finds out the quickest way to become popular with the animals is to buy the food cups.

park is open seven days a week March through November and opens only on the weekends December through February. Admission is \$6 for adults 13 and older and \$4.75 for children ages 7 to 12. Children ages 2 to 6 are charged \$3.50, and children under 2 are free. Senior citizens 60 and older pay \$5.



Black Jack, a 12-week-old black leopard raised and trained by Debbie Tramel, gives her a love pat.



Hope Craighill celebrates her 70th birthday at the West Coast Game Park by holding, Squirt, an apricot and white Asian skunk.



Shannon Boehm, of Roseburg, pets a siberian lynx, one of several at the park. (above)

Knowing the sound of park director Bob Tenney's voice, bears, Yogi and BooBoo, walk up to greet their friend and keeper.