

29th ZooLights feature 1.6 million colorful lights

The Oregon Zoo's ZooLights — a holiday tradition for many Oregonians — now include more than 1.6 million colorful lights adorning the many paths at the zoo. The light displays feature life-size animal silhouettes, moving sculptures, forests of lighted trees, a light-bedecked train, and more.

The annual winter ZooLights festival also features costumed animal mascots and elves that provide entertainment as well as photo opportunities for visitors; musical groups performing holiday selections; and some zoo animals visible at night, including the primates, elephants, mountain goats, leopards, tigers, sea otters, and more.

Oh, and there's also plenty of hot chocolate, elephant ears, and more to warm visitors while walking the zoo grounds. This year's lights illuminate the holidays through Sunday, January 1.

ZooLights have been featured in Portland since 1987. It was not a unique idea, but it was a successful one, according to a member of the zoo's marketing team back in the late 1980s.

"I unabashedly stole the idea," Karen Kane wrote in a statement. "I went to visit my parents in Toledo, Ohio and they dragged me to the zoo, where I saw hundreds, if not thousands of families, kids on dates, grandparents with little ones, etc., out for a night at the zoo."

Thinking that what she'd experienced was a fabulous idea, she called the Ohio zoo's director the next day to find out more. She was told they had borrowed the idea from the Cincinnati Zoo, which had been doing it for a few years.

When Kane came back home to Portland, planning for the Oregon Zoo's ZooLights began. In addition to increasing attendance during the winter, which was "maybe about 250 visitors on average in the month of December," it was a fun activity for people, she said. "The reaction of the people was so warm, so happy. They were delighted, there was a harmony there. That's just hard to describe in



words."

The zoo came up with \$5,000 to get the project off the ground. They found some

lights — "mostly all clear," according to Kane — to decorate the "trees in the old plaza and the walkway down to the ele-

WINTER FESTIVAL. The 29th edition of ZooLights includes more than 1.6 million colorful lights adorning the paths at the Oregon Zoo through Sunday, January 1. In addition to life-size animal silhouettes, moving sculptures, forests of lighted trees, and a light-bedecked train, the event also features costumed animal mascots and elves that provide entertainment as well as photo opportunities. (AR Photos)

phants." In 1988, its second year, ZooLights grew. Zoo staff and volunteers made displays out of Styrofoam that had been used as packing material for a set of chairs and a kitchen table. They painted the Styrofoam to look like animals, poked holes in it, and fed the clear lights through the holes.

From then on, as they say, the rest is history, and the light displays became more technological and computerized.

By about 1992, ZooLights featured around 10,000 lights on approximately 75 exhibits, which were mostly made of wood. These days, many of the wood displays have been replaced.

As the event grew, and in keeping with the zoo's commitment to sustainability, many of the lights now include light-emitting diodes (LEDs), which use only a fraction of the power of standard holiday lights. The 2016 display is about 90 percent LEDs, with the total of LEDs currently standing at 1.44 million.

Over the past five years, nearly a million visitors have strolled through ZooLights. "Attendance has been off the charts the past several years," according to Ivan Ratchiff, the zoo's guest services manager. In 2014, the zoo set an attendance record — 213,979 visitors — besting the previous record set in 2011, when 197,453 visitors experienced the light festival.

ZooLights can be viewed nightly through Sunday, January 1 from 5:00pm to 9:00pm, except for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, when the zoo is closed. To learn more about the display and parking options, or to purchase tickets, call (503) 226-1561 or visit <www.oregonzoo.org>. Guests who utilize TriMet to travel to ZooLights receive \$5 off general admission (proof of ridership is required).

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