Zoo one of area's most visited attractions

Baton Rouge has a community with a multinational population, filled with lovely landscapes, where many languages are spoken. It's the Greater Baton Rouge Zoo, located on Thomas Road just north of Metro Airport.

It's all happening at the zoo. Elephants are saddled and ready to be ridden, tiny hands are reaching out for food pellets and T-shirts are just laying there, waiting to be bought.

The zoo contains nearly 900 birds and animals from every continent on earth. Forty-three zoo employees see to their care and comfort, under the direction of George Felton, who has been the zoo's director since the mid-60s, when the idea of a modern Baton Rouge zoo was conceived.

Baton Rouge had a small zoo in the 1930s and 1940s, but it was closed for lack of funds. In 1965, a millage election made funds possible to start another zoo.

The Bureau of Outdoor Recreation matched those funds and construction began in 1966.

Today, the zoo's wilderness setting sprawls over 175 acres, including 40 acres that will be developed in the future.

"It's just like God made it," Felton said. "All we did was cut some trees and put in the exhibits."

Open, spacious enclosures lend a natural setting to many of the exhibits, particularly the exotic African hoofstock collection, which features 23 species of hoofstock and is considered one of the best collections in the U.S.

The zoo also boasts an Old World primate collection, featuring 14 species from Asian and Africa; seven species of endangered big cats and six species of lesser cats; four species of bears; reticulated giraffes, rhinos, paymy hippos and a beautiful collection of birds in 96 exhibit areas.

Seventeen exhibit areas are kept from public view to encourage the animals to breed and care for their young.

The zoo has been so successful at creating a romantic setting for their six rare purple-faced langurs that they are now the only zoo in the country housing the breed.

The zoo participates in the American Association of Zoos' Species Survival Plan, an effort to keep 32 endangered species genetically clean by keeping at least 500 of each breed in zoos across the country, Felton said. Thirteen of the 32 species can be found at the Baton Rouge Zoo.

By the year 2000, 600,000 plant and animal species will have disappeared from the earth. Zoos, which were once considered mainly a source of entertainment, are now charged with conservation, education, recreation and research.

As man encroaches on their habitat, zoos provide a place for the animals to make a last stand.

"The land in South America and Africa is disappearing in sections the size of Rhode Island every year. It's not that endangered species couldn't make it, it's that they are given no where to make it," he said.

The local zoo has the distinction of being one of 54 zoos in the country accredited by the American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums, and one of 40 zoos approved for the importation of animals into the country by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The zoo is an important educational tool for veterinary students, public and private school students and others with an interest in animals, providing from 40 to 50 programs that can be tailored to a specific group by zoo personnel.

Artists and photographers have a field day at the zoo, which has miles of paths winding through scenic settings and plenty of benches and water fountains. There is also a gift shop and two refreshment stands.

A tram winds along the zoo's many trails, which allows young children, the handicapped and others who want to tour the zoo without walking an opportunity to view all the animals.

By next spring, a new train will be up and running, with two stations located at the front and back of the grounds.

The zoo is open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. every day. Weekends, there are rides on an Asian elephant, Savannah.