Lonely duck was start of Zoo of Acadiana

By ANGELA SIMONEAUX

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Then he got interested in pheasants, met some interesting people at a pheasant convention, and one thing led to another. "Next thing you know, you own a zoo," Prejean said.

Some thought Prejean was crazy when he started talking about opening his own zoo, and more than a few people laughed at him. But the little zoo that could, the Zoo of Acadiana, will celebrate its second birthday in July, and the only people laughing now are the thousands of schoolchildren who come to see the animals.

"We're much further along than I thought we would be," said Prejean, whose dream zoo is one of only two he knows of in the United States that were started by private individuals.

The zoo, located about 10 minutes south of Lafayette just off U.S. 90, opened in July 1992 with 65 species of animals, including monkeys, wallabies, lemurs, antelope, llamas, alligators, several big cats, a giraffe and birds.

Since then, the zoo has acquired two lion cubs, two white rhinoceroses, a second tiger, three baboons and many other new animals.

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A goat waits impatiently in the petting zoo section of the Zoo of Acadiana as Kyle Stevenson, 8, of Youngsville buys a quarter’s worth of feed.

Zoo

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New animals that soon will be living in exhibits at the zoo include trios of gibbons and Mandrill baboons, and a North American black bear.

Prejean is planning to purchase another 12 acres adjacent to the zoo and build new exhibits for the lions, a space for his pheasant collection and a monkey island. He also plans to build a reptile house.

As Prejean tells it, he probably will never be finished with the zoo. "No, I’ll never be done," he said, laughing. "It’s too exciting, building new exhibits, acquiring new animals. I figure in three or four years, when I’m finished with all the building, then the maintenance will start."

Along with the structural changes, Prejean hopes to upgrade his animal collection and start a breeding program.

The zoo is completely independent; it’s supported through memberships and admissions. Memberships have doubled since last year, Prejean said, and attendance is up 22 percent.

"We’ll get over 100,000 this year," Prejean said. "I didn’t know what to expect at first, but I’m happy with what we’re getting."

The zoo has an open plan, with 1,500 feet of elevated wooden walkways taking visitors around trees and exhibits where the animals live.

The animals aren’t confined in small cages; they have lots of room to roam.

The highlight of the zoo is the aviary.

The walkway takes visitors through doorways covered by sheets of thick but flexible plastic that allow humans out but keep the birds in.

Inside the aviary are birdhouses and nests and trees and a pond for the waterfowl.

Instead of looking at birds in cages, visitors walk through the aviary as the birds fly from branch to branch over their heads, or paddle through the pond under their feet.

Alberta, a huge and vocal goose whose name was Albert until she laid an egg, invariably comes to the walkway to chat with passers-by.

Willie and Mary, two African lion cubs, also live in the aviary, although their exhibit is separated from the birds. The cubs are both less than a year old.

Knubby, the giraffe, greets visitors who climb up to an observation deck that is on Knubby’s eye level. Visitors can pet and feed Knubby, if he’s in the mood.

There also are two Bengal tigers, a jaguar retired from Southern University, Clyde and Ozzie the camels, two river otters, a pair of ring-tailed lemurs named Romeo and Juliet, a colorful macaw, and a petting zoo full of curious, friendly goats.

The zoo will be honoring its shortest patrons on June 4 with a special Kids Day.

Planned activities include face-painting, handmade helicopters from the Lafayette Natural History Museum, a program from the Acadiana Karate School, appearances by Castor the Beaver and Spot the 7-up character, free line-dance lessons, free children’s identification cards, a safety demonstration by Acadian Ambulance Service, demonstrations by the Acadian Gymnastics classes, and visits from zoo animals.

For more information, call the zoo at 837-4325.