



African Elephant Crossing opens at the Cleveland Metroparks Zoo

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James Ewinger, The Plain Dealer
By

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- "Mommy, we're going to get spattered with mud," 3-year-old C.J. Angelone said.

Moments later, an elephant fulfilled the boy's prophesy.

"He called it," said his mom, Sarah Angelone of Parma, as she cleaned up C.J.'s 2-year-old brother Vince.

The Angelones learned Thursday just how close people can get to the five pachyderms at the Cleveland Metroparks Zoo at the opening of the African Elephant Crossing. They also found an interactive feature the architects and planners never envisioned.

The mud flew when Martika, one of four female African elephants, was reveling in a giant mud bath in the exhibit's Savanna Range area -- an intended amenity that allows the elephants to cool themselves and gain insulation from the elements.

Young Vince was not happy with the collateral mess, but his was not the only opinion.

Brenda Moran, who lives up the hill from the zoo in the Old Brooklyn neighborhood, walked around proudly with elephant-launched mud that covered the right lens of her sunglasses. She hinted that she might not wash them.



[Enlarge](#)

Chuck Crow, The Plain Dealer

A crowd gets a close view of Willy, an 11-ft.-tall giant bull, during the opening of the Cleveland MetroParks Zoo's African Elephant Crossing on May 5, 2011.

[African Elephant Crossing opens](#) gallery (7 photos)

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Jon Stefansson, one of the exhibit's architects, was quietly pleased as visitors flowed in. "A tweak here and a tweak there," he said, noting some scuffed paint that needed a touchup. "Just like when you move into a new house."

Dr. Larry Killmar, director of collections at Tampa's Lowry Park Zoo, was at the dedication and pronounced the African Elephant Crossing "the gold standard for elephant exhibits." He predicts other major zoos will come to see how it's done.

The exhibit was designed to provide the elephant herd with a healthy, stimulating environment.

Some critics believe that there is no such thing as healthy, stimulating captivity. Zoo Director Steve Taylor and other zoo officials, however, have said the exhibit is an answer to the critics' concerns, not a cause for them.

"Obviously, the elephants are very comfortable," Killmar said.

As he looked at the sizable crowd, Taylor joked that a truant officer would have found the zoo's people-packed walkways a target-rich environment.

The school-age visitors were not the only ones playing hooky.

One woman from an outlying county asked that she not be identified "because I'm supposed to be at work."

The female elephants spent most of the morning on the Savanna. Willy, the lone bull elephant, had the forested Mopani Range to himself.

As VIPs started to mass near the Mopani around 8 a.m. for a formal dedication ceremony, Willy seemed indifferent as he munched grass and toyed with solid logs. When one weighs 13,300 pounds, after all, there's little to prove.

But then a talented drum-dance-and-vocal ensemble from the Beck Center for the Arts revved up before the exhibit's interior opened. Willie rose to the occasion. His ears flared like an iconic photo on a National Geographic cover. He began to sway and to move about, running from one end of the range to the other.

By midday, his usual calm returned.

Related coverage

- **Zoo launches phone app that has some animal magnetism**
- **Elephants' new home offers room to roam at zoo: Editorial**

Previous Plain Dealer coverage

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- Nice weather offers chance for elephants to try out new digs at zoo (**April 13**)
- Zoo completes elephant quartet (**March 11**)
- **More coverage of the zoo's elephant exhibit**

An estimated 7,000 visitors, on the other hand, achieved cheerful-horde status as their numbers swelled to a level more appropriate for a weekend than a weekday in early May.

Cars and school buses were relegated to the overflow parking lots, as vehicles and pedestrians crossed paths near the zoo's main gate.

Another crossing occurred inside the zoo about midday -- the signature event that named the elephants' new home.

Gates swung closed, keeping people from entering or exiting the new exhibit.

Then Jurassic Park-style steel gates opened to let Willy into the Savanna.

"It was so quiet and he didn't waste any time," said Fran Brown of Westlake, one of the awed visitors who waited five minutes as they watched the sauntering bull.

"This is as nice as Disneyland. I didn't expect that in Cleveland," Brown said. "I'm as excited as a child."

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A new elephant home, a new Zoo centerpiece

JAMES EWINGER, WILLIAM NEFF | THE PLAIN DEALER

The Cleveland Metroparks Zoo's \$25 million African Elephant Crossing does more than provide a spiffy and comfortable new home for the Zoo's herd of African elephants. The new habitat is carefully designed to keep the elephants physically fit and healthy by keeping them moving around in a spacious, varied environment — while at the same time giving Zoo patrons a closer look at these magnificent animals than they'll get at almost any other zoo.



Crossing gate

The elephant habitat takes its name from the *Crossing*. Elephants will be free — indeed, encouraged — to cross between the *Muskrat* and *Redwood* ranges through this gate structure. To give the heavy gates additional weight, at least 10 feet back from the animals to help guide them.

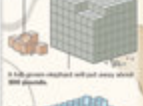
How big is big?

With the 100+ elephant addition, it will hold roughly 15,000 pounds of elephants.



That's the equivalent of about 10 people.

The average human weighs about 170 pounds of food on a daily diet.



A 100-pound elephant will eat about 300 pounds of feed.



Elephants will typically drink 100 gallons — the equivalent of 1000 glasses.

Meet the residents

Masha
Born 1971, Cape Province, Africa
Masha has the unusual habit of holding her trunk over her back and trunk, which is thought to be a subtle search.

Masha
Born 1976, Zimbabwe
Masha is the only elephant in the herd who has a white patch on her trunk.

Masha's mother
Masha's mother is the only elephant in the herd who has a white patch on her trunk.

Redwood
These orangutans have an almost 100% fat diet, which is why they are so healthy and live for about 100 years.

African birds
These birds are found in the wild. They are colorful and are found in the wild. They are colorful and are found in the wild.

African rock python
They are not poisonous, but they are large and powerful. They are not poisonous, but they are large and powerful.

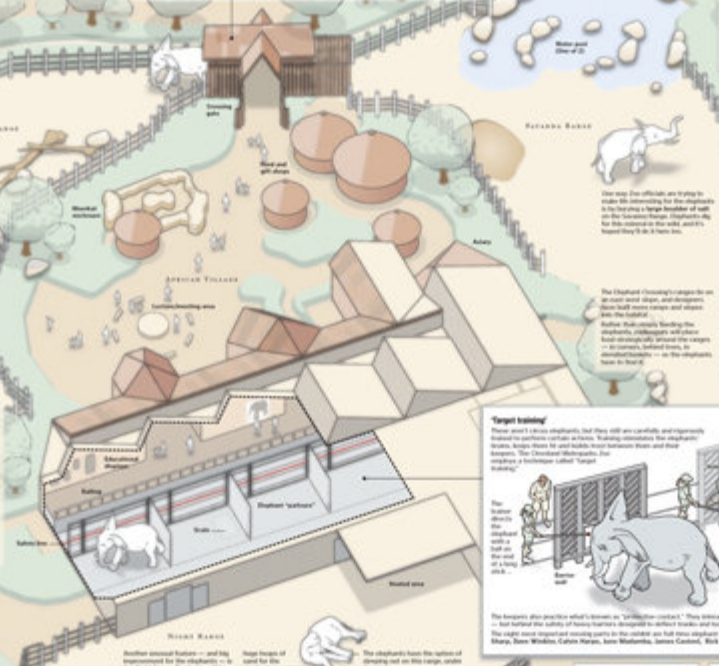
Willy
Willy is a young elephant who was born in the Zoo. He is a young elephant who was born in the Zoo.

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Room to move ...

The elephants' new range greatly improved the space they have to walk around. And elephants definitely do a lot of walking.



Old elephant enclosure

New elephant enclosure

with constraints.

The same team that designed the Elephant Crossing program also designed the enclosure. The enclosure is designed to be a safe and secure environment for the elephants. It is designed to be a safe and secure environment for the elephants.

'Target training'

These aren't African elephants, but they still are carefully and rigorously trained to perform certain actions.

Target training is a technique used to train animals to perform specific tasks. It is a technique used to train animals to perform specific tasks.

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Graphic: William Neff, The Plain Dealer. Online enhancement: Peter Zicari