

You 'otter' say thanks to WACF

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What swims in 3,000 gallons of water and has nearly 60,000 friends?

Why, it's Don and Darrel, of course!

If you don't know them, Don and Darrell are the otters whose home is Ottertown at the Bramble Park Zoo. Logistically, Ottertown is one of the first exhibits you see at the zoo which welcomes 60,000-plus visitors each year.

"It's one of the favorite exhibits at the zoo," said Dan Miller, Bramble Park Zoo executive director. "It's also the first underwater viewing exhibit we've ever done."

The exhibit incorporates



Courtesy photo

A young boy watches an otter do its underwater ballet at Bramble Park Zoo's Ottertown exhibit.

artificial rock for the "stream" and waterfall. The water features are operated by a pump system that continually cycles 3,000 pounds of water.

Though Ottertown is five

years old, planning began much sooner, and the Watertown Area Community Foundation was glad to participate. The Foundation awarded a \$150,000 grant, payable over three years, to support the project.

“Bramble Park Zoo is one of Watertown’s great assets,” commented Lee Schull, who was the WACF board chairman at the time.

Another board member at the time, Kate Benson, actually came up with the name Ottertown during a board meeting.

“What I remember is that we wanted to do something kind of big at the zoo,” Benson said. “When the possibility of bringing otters to Watertown came up, it was unanimous. We all thought it was a great idea.

“I’ve told my kids the story of me coming up with the name. They love Ottertown so they think I’m kind of famous,” Benson laughed.

Schull said the foundation has supported the zoo in many ways for many years.

“Ottertown is a perfect example of this and I think the exhibit offers something out of the ordinary for the visitors who come to our zoo and our community,” he said.

Benson knows first-hand how true that statement is. She has a friend in Sioux Falls with a summer home on Lake Kampeska and very much enjoys Watertown.

“They go to the zoo all the time,” said Benson. “It’s kind of fun to hear that perspective from someone who lives in Sioux Falls. I think it’s pretty unique for a community of our size to have a zoo as awesome as ours.”

All ages of otters are fun to watch, said Miller, and all ages like to watch them. But you may want to time your visit. Otters are very playful and Don and Darrel are no exception. In the summer they swim a lot and in the winter they make slides in the snow and they slide into the water.

They live up to their name, Miller said, which in the Dakota language, ‘Ptan,’ means ‘busy, busy, busy.’ That typically means, however, that they need a nap in the afternoon.

Summer zoo hours are 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. daily.

Otter Facts

1. There are 13 species of otters, and just about all of them are decreasing. The only one thriving is the North American River Otter (like those at Ottertown).

2. Otter Moms welcome other pups who have no mother.

3. Otters have the thickest fur of any mammal in the animal kingdom. They can have up to one million hairs

per square inch. There are two layers of fur – an undercoat and one with longer hairs that we can see. The layers trap air next to the otter’s skin so the otter stays dry and warm, as well as buoyant.

4. Otters need tools. They love to eat shelled animals, like clams, but need help to “open” their food. They will often use rocks to help and many times while they hunt for food, they store a rock in the skin under their arms for later use.

5. Otters are popular among Native American cultures for different reasons. Some tribes consider the otter “lucky” or a symbol of loyalty and honesty. But some, mainly in Canada and Alaska, associate the otter with dread and drowning.

6. Otters can be very chatty. In a 2014 study, river otters were noted to have 22 distinct noises for different situations.

7. Otters can help others. For example, in Bangladesh, otters help fishermen with their catch. For centuries, the fishermen have been training otters to act as herders and chase large schools of fish into their nets.

8. Otters like to play. In fact one of their favorite things is making slides along riverbanks from which to slide when they’re not feeding or sleeping.

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