

## Black Pine Animal Park

# Up close and personal with big cats

By Jody Grismore Vance

Sitting in the new commissary at the new Black Pine Animal Park in its new home at the 4-H Park just west of downtown Albion, Director of Development **Lori Gagen** talks about an old and growing problem—the exotic pet trade. She stresses repeatedly the need for people to understand that pet ownership is a responsibility and mentions some of the animals that have lucked out and found a new home at Black Pine—just as the park itself has found a new home.

“Big cats, small cats, primates, birds, camels, reptiles...” Reptiles? Reptiles? She is asked if there are any snakes and she answers, “A Burmese python, two red-tailed boas and a ball python.” She is asked, “Are they within 50 feet of me now?” She answers that there is one right next to me.

That’s the type of answer that will get your attention. And it is a funny situation: I’m amazed that I have been sitting next to a SNAKE for 20 minutes or more...and am not even on a plane. We laugh.

Black Pine wants to get people’s attention in another way, not by surprise but by letting people come in and actually see the animals that are considered “exotic”—either abandoned as the result of ill-thought out “pethood” or retired by circuses or others in the performing industry.

This can be an entertaining activity for children and animal lovers, and while that is a good thing, it is not a laughing matter. For Black Pine, the driving purpose is a matter of education about responsible pet ownership, helping people understand how to choose a pet and why exotic pets typically don’t make good pets. Gagen says, “That sort of thing has become a huge, huge problem for this country.”

It is also a huge concern for the park, but for this specific park—Black Pine Animal Park—it has not been the only big problem. 2006 was a transitional year for Black Pine Gagen says, referring to the repercussions of a lock, stock and barrel...camel, llama, tiger...move.

Notified in April of that year that they had to buy the land they were on or move, Black Pine—with what Gagen calls “an outpouring of support” from over 300 businesses and individuals and a \$1 lease of 18 acres of land from the commissioners—did what Horace Greeley advised. They went West...well, about a mile and a quarter west, outside of Albion and nestled next to the 4-H Park.

Gagen says, “Now visitors to the new Black Pine are going to see a much different setting here. We are surrounded by a pine forest; it’s a beautiful site. We are adjacent to the 4- H park so we have additional services right next door—in the way of an indoor pavilion that can be rented for family outings and company gatherings, in the way of an outdoor lawn area in case we want to have a concert or a cruise-in or something like that.”

In 2007 Black Pine did just that. Many enjoyed an Elvis tribute show was held last June. In addition, a new event, dubbed Lions and Tigers and Beer, was such a hit in 2007 it will be repeated annually in early October. The park even opened for the holidays last year so people could come see the animals receive their “gifts”—food and toys were distributed while visitors observed and enjoyed hot cocoa. These and other activities are planned again in 2008. All such events help fund the costs of operating the facility.

One aspect of the grounds—the park’s “new digs” so to speak—is size. Gagen speaks of more space (half again as big) and says, “What people are going to see is just everything’s new, everything’s shiny, everything’s bright; the grounds are much more remote—we’re not surrounded by the town—so I think nature lovers are going to experience just that much more overall.”

In the relocation, the park gained something more than a more pleasant present; they gained potential for the future. Gagen re-caps the situation before the move: “We were landlocked; we were in a situation where there are literally thousands of animals across the country who need a home every year—tigers, lions, monkeys birds...and we literally had run out of room. She then sums up the change: “Important for our mission is we gained the space to, over time, adopt more animals and better accommodate the ones we have.”

To sustain and advance this transition, Gagen emphasizes that the park will need to see “a lot of people come out and visit us and to understand that by visiting, they are supporting us and this organization.”

She pauses, considering the emphasis that the Park puts on the mission of caring for exotic animals and says, “Sometimes we do get caught up in the seriousness of our mission, but without these people coming through the gate, we wouldn’t be able to do what we do.”

And Black Pine has lots of things to offer to make those visits attractive. First of all, of course, are the animals themselves and Gagen says, “We do share the animals here; people can feed the llamas and donkeys, deer and other animals that live out in this pasture area.”

Then stressing that the keepers and volunteers are very interactive with visitors, she says, “It’s not a situation where (people) are just standing behind a fence looking at the animals from a distance; when they are walking around, observing lions and tigers and leopards and so forth, the staff that is working with the cats will be bringing them up where people can really see them.” Gagen talks of the contact and people having any questions answered and makes an important point: “It is just a much more intimate experience than any zoo.”

Black Pine also offers a sharing time for families. This is probably a good time to mention the traditional SummerFest, which is held the last Saturday of July each year. Gagen says, “It is a full day of nonstop animal presentation, refreshments, kids’ activities and crafts—extra things that we do for the same admission price; it doesn’t cost any more to come in but we have a whole lot more going on.”

Gagen mentions another activity familiar to park-goers—family overnight camps—and says that although it will be suspended during this transitional time, it will resume in the future. She says, “People bring their own tent, pitch it and camp over night. They do a back yard barbeque and a movie after dark, and perhaps a silent auction.” You can think of them as “BYOT” parties—Bring Your Own Tent.

Looking at families in a more extended view, the park provides an opportunity for generations to bridge differences with a common interest. The park has grandparent membership packages for this reason and Gagen explains, “A grandparent can buy a membership and it is good for themselves and any or all of their grandchildren. They can come as often as they like.”

Continuing to speak about seniors, she says, “We actually do have a lot of seniors who come through on their own...(They enjoy) the fresh air and being out in nature; it’s peaceful—the blue sky and pine trees.” Park staff carts can be used to provide tours for the elderly and handicapped and, in fact, Gagen says they are working on getting some passenger carts for that purpose.

Black Pine also offers programs for kids, ages 3 to 16, presented in three different age groups. There is a series of Saturday camps—morning or afternoon for three to four hours, and Gagen explains, “We encourage the kids to get behind the scenes and actually see how and what we feed the animals and how we provide enrichment to stimulate them in captivity. They see how we make sure that they are content.”

She says some camps have focused on how animals camouflage themselves in the wild and adds, “We have done big cats vs. reptiles and a variety of topics that are age appropriate.”

Work at the Park is divided into three areas of responsibility: Gagen explains, “My area is administration, fundraising and program development. **Jessica Price** is our senior zookeeper and she’s in charge of everything related to animal husbandry, veterinary care. **Josh (Price)** is operations manager and all the facilities; construction and so forth fall under his area. However, they are somewhat like the Three Musketeers and she says, “We cross over and work as a team on a lot of things.”

They also have an internship program for high school students and college students who come for periods from three-to-four weeks long to 10–to-12 week stints. Those people work on an almost daily basis.

And, finally, hanging by the door is evidence of the foundation of programs such as Black Pine Animal Park—volunteer badges. Gagen says, “We have about 50 volunteers,” and adds, “We are grateful for having the most passionate group of volunteers any organization could ask for.”

The park will be open in 2008 from May 18th through Labor Day from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Additional tours and programs are also available by appointment year-round. Admission is free under two and ranges up to \$7.00. Information is available at (260) 636-7383 and [www.blackpineanimalpark.com](http://www.blackpineanimalpark.com).