

‘More than a sideshow’: Alligator & Wildlife Discovery Center celebrates 10 years, looks ahead

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Chip and Fido are among the attractions at the Alligator & Wildlife Discovery Center in John' Village. But, it's much more than a place where tourists can kiss a gator owner of the venue that will be celebrating its 10th anniversary soon.

Photos courtesy of the Alligator & Wildlife Discovery Center

MADEIRA BEACH — Alligators, lizards, fish, snakes, rescued exotic animals, and an especially large 30-year-old tortoise appropriately named Rudolph will celebrate the holidays and a special anniversary with the public this month in John's Pass Village.

The venue — and their home — is the Alligator & Wildlife Discovery Center, formerly known as the Alligator Attraction, that encompasses 10,000-square-feet on the second floor above many of the tourist shops along Village Boulevard.

The occasion is the 10th anniversary of the conservation and exotic animal rescue center — as well as Rudolph's 30th birthday, which falls serendipitously on Christmas day. The center will open from 10 a.m. until 2 p.m. on Dec. 25 for families to help celebrate Rudolph's birthday.

Beginning on Friday, Dec. 17, the public is invited to come for cake and special treats for the rescued animals and to participate in contests, win prizes and meet a special guest that Flynn has yet to reveal. The center also will sponsor special events throughout the week and ending on Thursday, Dec. 23.

Rudolph was the very first resident at the center after he was rescued from an abandoned tortoise farm in South Florida by the center's then-owner, Robert Barrett, in 2011. Current owner Sonny Flynn and her partner, former Madeira Beach Mayor Travis Palladino, purchased the center in 2017 when Barrett retired.

Rudolph now weighs 100 pounds and will top out at about 225 pounds when he is full-grown. He is an African spurred tortoise, the third largest tortoise in the world, and will live up to 100 years.

Every rescued animal has a name

Today, Rudolph has been joined by nearly 250 friends— alligators, lizards, pigs, skunks, guinea pigs, rabbits, snakes, fish and other exotic animals.

“Every fish and animal that we have has a name. They all have personalities, and a lot of them have beautiful stories,” said Flynn.

Here are just some of them:

- Cheddar, a young 18-inch-long alligator who was abandoned by her Wisconsin owner. Rescue officials in Wisconsin offered the alligator to the center.

- Dewi, an 18-month-old, tri-colored Prevost's squirrel from Indonesia who was surrendered by her former owner in Michigan after her mom began fighting with her and chewed off the end of her tail.
- Flower and Roma, two "beautiful" skunks that Flynn assures are de-scented. The skunks were abandoned by their owner in South Florida and adopted by the AWDC when Florida Skunk Rescue was unable to rehome them.
- Jasper, an albino Columbian red tail boa that Flynn says is "the gentlest creature we have and loves being held." He is about 6 feet long.
- Chelsea, a green iguana, an animal that the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission has designated as an invasive species and no longer allows to be pets.
- Journey and Safari, two albino alligators that are on loan from a South Florida reptile facility. They are now less than 2 feet long and will have to be returned when they grow to about 4 feet.
- Sonic and Quills, two African pigmy hedgehogs that were found wandering in a park by the FWC. Daniel Glenn, the center's marketing director, calls them on the "high end of cuteness chart."

Flynn's personal favorites are a black and white ruffed lemur named Wicket and a fennec fox named Punky.

"My favorites go home with me every night. I traded a several tanks to a wildlife park in South Florida in exchange for Wicket, who was going to be sent away. Punky came from a breeder in South Florida who went bankrupt during Covid and couldn't feed him. The FWC asked if I wanted to take him," Flynn explained.

Evolution to a rescue and education center

Flynn, 57, has been involved with the center since 2012 when she became Barrett's operations manager and saw it initially grow from one tortoise and 50 alligators to include an extensive aquarium section stocked with exotic fish, including a poisonous zebra moray eel native to the Indian and Pacific oceans, and a lionfish, a venomous marine fish also found in the Indo-Pacific region, and myriad exotic animals, many through its partnership with the FWC.

"In 2017, I talked Travis into buying it with me when Bob retired," Flynn said. "I wouldn't have been able to do it if it wasn't for him. Shortly after we took over, we changed the name to Alligator Wildlife Discovery Center — I wanted it to be more than a side show attraction."

Today, Palladino is not involved in the daily operation, according to Flynn, but does come in occasionally to "play with the pigs" and help with the fish. He is a majority owner.

Over the years, the center has expanded from 1,500 square feet to its current 10,000 square feet. Ninety-five percent of its nearly 250 animals are rescues and pet surrenders, including macaws, raccoons, a sloth, tarantulas, scorpions, 21 different species of lizards and a "phenomenal" aquarium, according to Flynn.

"I have a hard time saying no. My vision was to go more educational about wildlife, to let people know that exotic animals don't necessarily make good pets, but if you take proper care of them, they can make a great pet," she said. "We also explain why some animals and fish are so deadly to our waters," Flynn explained.

The center will accept several new rescue birds this month: two macaws, an Amazon parrot and two Quakers, which are small South American parakeets. "One of the parakeets is injured and the male protects her. We can't separate them; she has a bad wing and can't fly. We haven't named them yet," said Flynn.

The center, which now employs up to two dozen people, participated in the Great American Teach-in at nine Pinellas County schools this year.

The AWDC's education program includes information on the 477 invasive plants, fish and animals found in Florida.

"We really go into detail about invasive species and why it is critical to have them chipped, because some people release them out into the wild," says Flynn.

The center also offers schools thematic tours and workshops taught by professional animal keepers and is a Certified Autism Center offering programs for students with special educational needs.

The center is a non-profit organization but does charge admission that helps to cover the food and care for its exotic residents. Admission is \$8 for children, \$12 for adults, and \$10 for seniors. Tickets can be purchased on the center's website, www.kissagator.com, where special events and private tours can also be booked.

The discovery center also encourages monetary and in-kind donations from the community and corporations. For example, visitors to the center can donate \$5 for a "Rescue Hold" that would be used for direct care of the animal they hold.

"We also have three beautiful veterinarians who donate their time to do health inspections and are on call for emergency care," Flynn says.

On Feb. 19, 2022, the center will host its first annual fundraising event: the Kiss-a-Gator Gala. The black-tie gathering will be at the Don CeSar Hotel in St. Pete Beach and will feature a three-course meal with wine, an open bar, live entertainment, and a silent auction.

The center is collecting a variety of items for the silent auction that so far range from sports memorabilia and artwork to hotel stays.

Proceeds will benefit John's Pass Rescue, a nonprofit organization associated with the center, and will be used to provide "humane, professional care for pet surrenders and native orphaned wildlife that cannot be easily returned to the wild," and to upgrade and add new animal enclosures.

Flynn specifically hopes to raise enough money for a down payment on a yet-identified acre of land in the county that would allow an open space environment for rescue animals.

"We need land for some of our animals. Pigs need outside basking time. Iguanas and other animals need to see more daylight than we can give them on our little porch at the center," said Flynn. "We are waiting to see what we raise — hopefully it will be a big chunk! The last acre we looked at was \$485,000."

According to Glenn, the center's long-range goal is to become a multi-location, nonprofit version of the Clearwater Aquarium for rescued wildlife and abandoned exotic pets.

Busy in tourism, transportation

Flynn, 57, certainly keeps herself busy. For the past eight years, she has led the John's Pass Merchants Association as its president and been largely responsible for one of the city's major events, The John's Pass Seafood Festival. This year, she has turned over sponsorship of the festival to the city and will serve as a consultant.

She is also heavily involved in Pinellas County tourism, traveling with Visit St. Pete/Clearwater and Visit Florida. Flynn also is the incoming chair of Tampa Bay Beaches Chamber of Commerce.

Flynn regularly promotes the AWDC at tourist shows and local events, exhibits monthly at the Oldsmar Flea Market, and will be at Florida Botanical Gardens' Holiday Lights through Dec. 17.

Twice monthly, she brings some of the center's residents to local hotels, including the Marriott Sand Key, the Sirata and the Don CeSar.

"They invite us to give their guests a little taste of what we offer — a chance to hold an alligator or a bearded dragon, and play with a lemur," Flynn said.

Somehow, she has also found time to start a new company, Barrier Island Transport Entertainment LLC, otherwise known as the BITE Trolley, serving visitors to Madeira Beach, Treasure Island, St. Pete Beach and downtown St. Petersburg.

Trolley riders can sample beers from local breweries and even meet "animal ambassadors" provided by the AWDC. The trolley's Sand Dollar Loop stops at 16 restaurants and bars along its route from John's Pass to Treasure Island and the Corey Avenue District in St. Pete Beach. An expanded Gator Bite route will connect Pier 60 in Clearwater to John's Pass Village.

"I just love it. I am very compassionate and excited about everything I do," Flynn said.