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Animal keeper Megan Heidenreich holds Dora, a South American Coati, on her shoulders at the Gulf Breeze Zoo on Saturday morning. Coati siblings Dora and Diego turned one this week and the zoo celebrated their birthday with treats, toys and a new exhibit for them to call home. / Katie King / kking@pnj.com

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Anyone who's spent time living near Gulf Breeze can testify to the fact that the small private zoo set just off the highway has met with more than the lion's share of struggles. Like many businesses in the local area, the zoo was devastated by the active trend of destruction that began in 2004 with Hurricanes Ivan and Dennis; and when the economic crisis began, the zoo was finally brought to its knees and was forced to close in August 2009. Until last year, it seemed uncertain if the zoo that had so long been a part of the landscape would ever reopen.

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## WANT TO GO?

- » WHAT: Gulf Breeze Zoo
- » WHEN: 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily. Last admission is one hour before closing.
- » WHERE: 5701 Gulf Breeze Parkway, Gulf Breeze
- » COST: \$12 for adults; \$8 for children ages 2 to 12; senior, military and group discounts available.
- » DETAILS: 922-2229 or visit [www.gulfbreezozoo.org](http://www.gulfbreezozoo.org).

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Fortunately, new buyers stepped in and began to put their own stamp on the Gulf Breeze Zoo, determined to make it bigger and better. Part of the plan was to take the shell of the old zoo and breathe new life into it-- and what better way to do that than by literally breathing new life into it? With the arrival of animals new to the zoo and an active baby season, spring and summer are making the zoo a veritable hotbed of excitement.

"This whole area will be a mess of babies by the end of June!" zoo director Kayte Wanko said. With more than 30 acres of free-range ground, "we have a lot of breeding that goes on here," she said.

While the past year has been concentrated mostly on revamping and renovating to bring the zoo up to code to meet the standards of various accrediting agencies, its focus has shifted for the year ahead.

"We're spending more time this year on exhibits and things that people will see and notice," Wanko said.

Among those most noticeable aspects are all of the new animals. Notably, the first emu chick to be hatched at The Gulf Breeze Zoo for a decade recently became part of the ever-growing family of animals. Nine month-old bear cub sisters, Lola and Lana, were brought in from a New York zoo; and a baby marmoset was born two months ago, with more on the way. Chaka, the baby hippo born five months ago, adds an extra little bit of exotic interest to things, his chubby body almost comical in its movements. Among the zoo's crowning glories is their pair of gorillas. As one of only three private facilities in the nation with a pair of breeding gorillas, the Gulf Breeze Zoo has high hopes that they will soon become the first to actually successfully birth offspring. The most active part of the zoo seems to be the farm-yard like area where bunnies, goats, lambs, and guinea pigs are experiencing a constant cycle of newborns.

"We have guinea pig babies like crazy, and we always have baby bunnies," Wanko said as she pointed out the numerous new additions to the busy pens.

Among plans to update the zoo's attractions is a budgieary opening in June. Zoo patrons will be able to walk through an exhibit of budgies, with more than 300 of these small Australian parakeets in free flight all around them, giving them a truly unique experience. Otters, which were once a popular part of the original zoo, have recently been brought back and are expected to begin breeding soon. A male giraffe was brought in nearly a year ago as a companion to the female giraffe that has been a well-loved part of the zoo for years, and hopes are strong that a baby giraffe will soon be on its way. Additionally, a new llama feeding station was added, and the cotamundi that were brought in just over six months ago recently celebrated their first birthday. These South American raccoons are, according to Wanko, "Super naughty! They're always playing, always getting into things." The enthusiasm she feels for the animals in her care is obvious in both her voice and on her face, bubbling over into an almost encyclopedic knowledge of her charges.

The zoo's ultimate goal is to bring in new animals and have new things going on every couple of months, so that zoo-goers never have the same experience twice. With so many things on-tap, including a squirrel monkey exhibit and Walk Through Australia coming up this summer, there seems to be no chance for tedium.

"It's going to be a really fun year," Wanko said.

With enthusiasm as contagious as hers, the fun is almost guaranteed.

