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E.T. IS TURNING 30, AND THERE WILL BE A WHOPPING BIG WALRUS PARTY

Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium marks a milestone for the iconic marine mammal who came to Tacoma in 1982 as a 155-pound orphan from Alaska's North Slope; he's now a 3,450-pound community treasure



When: June 15, 16 and 17, 9:30 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Where: Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium, 5400 N. Pearl St., Tacoma

What's the party plan? A range of activities, including a fishy birthday cake for E.T. and his walrus pool mates, Basilla and Joan, each day at 11:30 a.m.; fishsicle treats for them at 3 p.m. daily; E.T.-focused keeper talks at 11 a.m. and 3 p.m.; an

appropriately huge birthday card to sign; photo opportunities with an E.T.-sized photograph of the star himself; crafts and games.

All activities free with zoo admission

Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium is celebrating the 30th birthday of a loveable giant next week.

The party is so appropriately huge, it will take three days to hold it.

Of course, the guest of honor is a pretty big star in this Summer of Superstars at Point Defiance Zoo.

E.T. the walrus weighs 3,450 pounds, is 11 feet long and about 11 feet around, if you measure him at his widest girth.

He's roughly the size of a small car, and he can sound like one, too, what with his repertoire of chuggachugga-like belches and bellows, snorts and whistles and bell-like vocals.

No one knows his actual birthdate, but zoo records show he was about two months old when he came to Tacoma in August of 1982. That puts his birthday sometime in June.

And it makes this the year of his Big Three-O, a landmark for any mammal.

But it's not just his birthday staff and visitors at Point Defiance will celebrate. E.T. is one of the most iconic and enduring animals in the zoo's 107-year history. The story of his 30 years in Tacoma began with a touching rescue, developed into a strong bond between a community and a walrus and continues daily with E.T. as a larger-than-life ambassador for his species.

He looked like a little wizened old man, his face bristled, his skin weathered, when oil workers discovered him abandoned and alone. They kept watch over him for days, hoping he would be reunited with other walruses. He walked three miles across the Arctic tundra in search of his family.

The oil workers named him E.T. because of his resemblance to the space creature from "E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial," the popular movie of that summer.

He weighed only 155 pounds, and he was dehydrated, veterinarians would later say. When his mother did not appear, U.S. Fish & Wildlife officials and the Alaska Zoo rallied to E.T.'s rescue, taking him into immediate care and giving him the fluids he desperately needed. Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium, nearing completion of its Rocky Shores exhibit, volunteered to take him in and give him a home.

Alaska Zoo vets described him as a "very frail animal," and when they reported he was nursing from a bottle, Tacoma rejoiced.

He arrived at Point Defiance on Aug. 17, 1982, and was immediately whisked into the zoo hospital for round-the-clock care.

When a healthy E.T. dipped into the new Rocky Shores complex two months later, he also dove deep in the heart of a community.

After three decades, he's still a huge "must" at the Zoo, the living local icon you can see underwater, nose-to-glass, an automobile-sized ambassador for his species.

"He's the best walrus ever," said senior staff biologist Lisa Triggs, who's cared for E.T. for half his life. "He is a really laid-back animal. He's patient and forgiving. He has a really good personality."

He's smart, too. When Triggs cues him to do something, E. T. complies. He voluntarily presents himself for saliva and blood samples, teeth brushing, weekly weigh-ins and other examinations that help staff manage his health care.

Good thing, too, because you can't make a 3,450-pound walrus climb on a scale if he doesn't want to. She calls his vocalizations, including one train-whistle-like blow, "awesome."

Zoo biologists have long hoped E.T. might father a calf. He's had several girlfriends over the years. Joan and Basilla arrived in 2006 to woo the gentle giant. But there have been no pregnancies – not for lack of trying.

Triggs studies their hormones, seeking ways to facilitate breeding. She's writing a master's degree thesis on more than five years' research.

Another researcher, Dr. Shawn R. Noren, regularly measures the walruses' girth for a study on the effects of climate change, work that ultimately may help E.T.'s wild brethren.

Most people will never see a Pacific walrus in the wild, Triggs said. And since there are only 17 in U.S. zoos and aquariums—Tacoma has three—many will never know the joy of seeing one at all.

E.T., Joan and Basilla aren't just fun to watch as they swim in the Rocky Shores pool, they're daily reminders of the need to care for the world's oceans and the creatures that call them home, Triggs said

"I think it's wonderful," she added, "that they are acting as ambassadors for their wild counterparts." E.T., she said with a huge smile, "is the coolest one of all."

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Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium, the Northwest's only combined zoo and aquarium, promotes responsible stewardship of the world's resources through education, conservation, research and recreational opportunities. The zoo, a division of Metro Parks Tacoma, is accredited by the Association of Zoos & Aquariums (AZA) and the Alliance of Marine Mammal Parks and Aquariums (AMMPA).

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