



E.T.: 1982-2015

Pacific walrus inspired generations to learn more about Arctic animals



E.T. arrived in Tacoma in the summer of 1982 as a 155-pound orphan who was rescued from the Prudhoe Bay region of Alaska after oil workers noticed the stranded walrus and became concerned about him.

They initially thought he might be reunited with his mother, but after the little walrus wandered more than three miles over the tundra in search of his family, officials were called to his aid.

He looked like a little wizened old man, his face bristled, his skin weathered, when the oilmen discovered him abandoned and alone. They named him E.T. because of his resemblance to the space creature from “E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial,” the popular movie of that summer.

U.S. Fish & Wildlife officials and Alaska Zoo staff rallied to the little walrus pup’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.

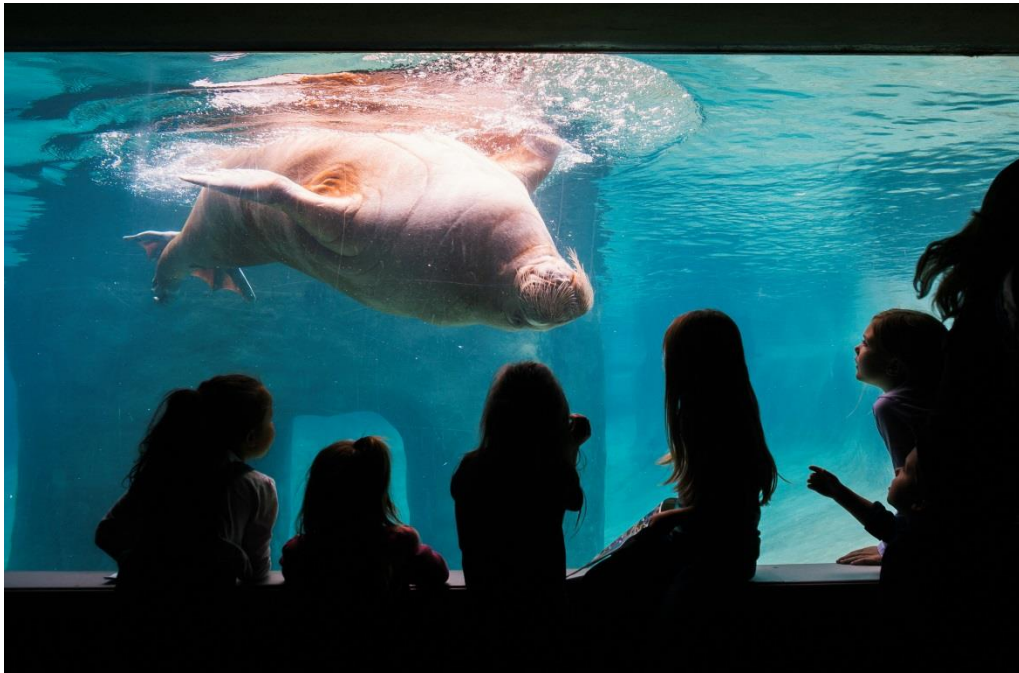
He arrived at Point Defiance on Aug. 17, 1982, and was immediately whisked into the zoo hospital for round-the-clock care.

Thus began a love affair between Tacoma and the walrus it adopted.

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.

During his breeding season, E.T. weighed around 4,000 pounds. He was about 11 feet long and about 11 feet around, if you measured him at his widest girth.

He was roughly the size of a small car, and could sound like one, too, what with his repertoire of chugga-chugga-like belches and bellows, snorts and whistles and bell-like vocals.



For more than three decades he was a huge “must-see” at the zoo, a local icon who could be viewed underwater, nose-to-glass, an automobile-sized ambassador for his species.

He was smart, too. When senior staff biologist Lisa Triggs gave him cues him to do something, E. T. usually complied, voluntarily

presenting himself for saliva and blood samples, tooth brushing, weekly weigh-ins and other examinations to help staff manage his health care.

She called his vocalizations, including one train-whistle-like blow, “awesome.”

Zoo biologists long hoped E.T. might father a calf. He had several girlfriends over the years. Joan and Basilla arrived in 2006 to woo the gentle giant. But there were no pregnancies.

With the loss of E.T., just 16 walruses remain in North American zoos and aquariums.

Pacific walruses are protected under the the Marine Mammal Protection Act. It’s not known precisely how many remain in the wild. The International Union for Conservation of Nature says there is insufficient data on the numbers of all species of walruses in the wild to determine whether they are a threatened or endangered species, but scientists believe their numbers are pressured by the disappearance of sea ice due to climate change.

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Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium, the Northwest’s only combined zoo and aquarium, practices and 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).

