

2026 ZOO TEEN PROGRAM INFORMATION



ABOUT THE PROGRAM

The Zoo Teen program is designed for students 14-17 years of age who have a desire to explore animal-related careers, including zookeeping, conservation and wildlife education. An excellent leadership opportunity, this structured volunteer program will provide students with the opportunity to build a variety of transferable job skills, such as interpersonal communication, customer service, time management, problem-solving, professional conduct, and public speaking.

First year participants focus on foundational skills, practicing visitor engagement and wildlife education by assisting with a variety of education initiatives. Mentored by Zoo staff, these teens will work with a limited set of animals to develop a deep understanding of the importance of wildlife conservation and a Zoo's role in educating the public. Returning participants will further build upon these engagement skills and will also work with zookeepers on safe husbandry tasks, developing the knowledge and skillset needed for a future career in animal-related fields.

The Zoo Teen program is funded by program fees, donations and sponsorships of area businesses.

Zoo Teen Mission Statement:

The Mission of the Zoo Teen Program is to provide an opportunity for area youth to engage with Columbian Park Zoo, gain an appreciation for the importance of zoos and conservation, to explore animal-related careers while building transferable job skills, and to empower youth to become community leaders/advocates for conservation action.

WHAT DOES A ZOO TEEN DO?

Zoo Teens perform only non-dangerous zoo tasks and are supervised by a team of qualified, professional zookeepers and educators. First year participants focus on customer service and engagement, with limited zookeeping tasks, while returning Zoo Teens train on additional zookeeping tasks. The program is designed for up to four years of participation, with increasing levels of responsibility and new training opportunities in each returning year.

Some of the tasks that Zoo Teens may perform include:

1. Learning animal handling skills to present small animals to various audiences
2. Interacting with the public by answering questions about the Zoo, and the Zoo Teen program
3. Presenting bio-facts and animal information as exhibit-side interpreters
4. Monitoring immersion exhibits such as the Family Farm, Butterfly Garden Party and Wallaby Walkabout
5. Assisting in the classroom with the education programs, such as summer camps
6. Informing our patrons about the mission of Columbian Park Zoo and the important role zoos play in wildlife conservation
7. Assisting with enclosure cleaning and exhibit maintenance
8. Assisting with light landscaping and facility maintenance
9. Assisting with grooming or exercising education program animals
10. Assisting with diet preparation and feeding of the animal collection

ELIGIBILITY

In order to participate in the 2026 Zoo Teen program, an individual must be between 14 and 17 years of age on June 1, 2026. Students who turn 18 during the course of the summer are permitted to apply. Students who are already 18 years of age or greater on June 1, 2026 are not eligible to participate in the Zoo Teen program but may apply to our adult volunteer program.

What qualities do we look for in a Zoo Teen?

A Zoo Teen Candidate will be:

- Trustworthy, reliable and responsible
- Able to present a neat and well-groomed appearance
- Able to accept supervision of adults and ask for assistance when needed
- Courteous to his/her peers, the general public, volunteers and staff
- Willing to learn new skills and get his/her hands dirty
- Willing to engage with others through public speaking and visitor interactions
- Able to share the Zoo's wildlife conservation and education messages with enthusiasm
- Comfortable working with patrons of all ages and backgrounds
- Able to demonstrate a positive attitude at all times
- Supportive of the Columbian Park Zoo's mission

What kind of effort is required?

Zoo Teens are required to perform many kinds of physical tasks which may include standing for prolonged periods of time, safe lifting, reaching, bending, climbing, kneeling, shoveling/raking, pushing/pulling objects, and handling/grasping objects.

Much of the work Zoo Teens do takes place outside and in various weather conditions. In addition, many zoo buildings are not air-conditioned and can be uncomfortable and smelly during hot summer months. A Zoo Teen must be willing and able to work in these types of environments. The Columbian Park Zoo will make reasonable accommodations to allow the participation of individuals with disabilities.

Other eligibility requirements

Zoo Teen candidates must:

- Be available to attend one group interview session, if invited* *First years only, see important dates section*
- Be able to attend the required training sessions* *see time commitment section*
- Be able to donate a minimum of 45 hours over the course of the Zoo Teen season
- Be able to commit to a weekly shift (*with minimal time off needs*) and make up any missed shifts
- Have reliable transportation to and from the Zoo
- Be willing to adhere to all Zoo Teen policies and procedures
- Obtain a parent/legal guardian's permission to apply for and participate in the Zoo Teen program.

What is required of a Zoo Teen parent?

We believe participation in a program such as this can be an important step towards teen independence. For this reason, parent requirements are kept to a minimum. Parents of Zoo Teens are expected to:

- Ensure their child meets all of the eligibility criteria above and adheres to all Zoo Teen guidelines (outlined in the *Columbian Park Zoo's Zoo Teen Policies and Contract Form*)
- Sign all participation agreements and permission slips
- Ensure their child has reliable transportation to and from the zoo
- Be available for counseling and feedback as the need arises

Program Fees

The Zoo Teen program is funded by participation fees, donations, and the generous sponsorship of area businesses.

Fees for the 2026 Zoo Teen Program are as follows:

First Year Zoo Teens - \$150
Returning Zoo Teens - \$135

These fees will be applied toward the cost of class materials and instruction, a uniform t-shirt, incentive opportunities and other Zoo Teen activities and expenses. **NOTE: DO NOT SUBMIT FEES WITH YOUR APPLICATION MATERIALS.** Fees will be electronically invoiced to participants once selections are made and must be paid by May 15, 2026.

Please note program fees are NON-REFUNDABLE. No refund will be made if a Zoo Teen does not complete the season for any reason, or if a selected applicant withdraws from the program during or prior to the training sessions.

We strive to keep the cost to participating families as low as possible. The Zoo Teen program is a unique opportunity that we feel no child should miss out on simply because of their family's inability to pay. Limited financial assistance is available to families with a genuine need. Please contact zooteen@lafayette.in.gov for more information, deadline March 31st. Likewise, those families with the ability to donate beyond their basic fees are encouraged to make a small contribution to the Zoo Teen Scholarship Fund.

TIME COMMITMENT

Zoo Teens are expected to donate a minimum of 45 hours of time over the course of the 2026 Zoo Teen season. This can be achieved through a combination of regular summer work shifts and special event shifts made available to Zoo Teens. The bulk of these hours should be completed during summer work shifts (June-August), with a finite number of fall weekends and special events available for additional hours and make-up shifts.

We understand that teens have busy schedules and allow teens to schedule their own weekly shifts to accommodate summer school, sports, band, jobs, etc. Requests to skip a week due to family vacations, sports camps, etc. may be accommodated on a very limited basis, and make-up shifts are required in another week. Before applying to the Zoo Teen program, teens should consider all of the activities and obligations they will have this summer and decide whether the Zoo Teen program can be a priority in their lives and a weekly commitment they can comfortably make. Because this program is a unique opportunity with a limited number of spaces each year, only serious and committed individuals should apply.

Training

In addition to summer work shifts, **first-year participants must attend a 5-day training, June 1-5, 2026, from 1:00pm-5:00pm each day.** Participants must attend all 5 mandatory training days, as Zoo Teens will have the opportunity to learn about important zoo safety and hygiene information, the zoo industry, wildlife conservation, customer service, and interpretation. They will also complete animal handling training with eligible Animal Ambassadors (education program animals).

Returning Zoo Teens must also complete training each year. **A single "fast-track" refresher training session is available only to returning participants and will be offered on May 16th, 2026, from 9am-4pm.** This fast-track session will be offered one time only, and participants must attend the session in full. Any returning Zoo Teen who is not able to attend Fast Track must report to the 5 days of training in June in order to be eligible to participate in the Zoo Teen Program.

WORK SCHEDULE

Work shifts are made available to Zoo Teens after training sessions take place, based on the following schedule:

- **Returning participants: May 23rd**
 - **New participants: June 7th**
 - **Summer work shifts for all Zoo Teens end on August 9th**
 - **Select fall shifts are available August-December, dates announced at the end of the summer season**
- *An individual's first shift will not be required prior to the start of their school's summer break*

Each participant is expected to volunteer one work shift per week.

Each work shift is 4 hours long. The following daily work shifts are available: **8:00am-12:00pm & 1:00-5:00pm**
Additional shifts with different hours may be offered for special events and programs.

Teenagers are busy, and we get that! To allow for more flexibility, all Zoo Teen shifts will be self-scheduled through the Zoo's volunteer software – participants will be responsible for their own schedule! Zoo Teens will be trained to utilize the software, signing up and modifying summer shifts as needed. They will also use this software program to sign up for additional shifts this fall for the Zoo's special events, and Zoo Teen weekend shifts.

Missed shifts due to excused absences must be requested in advance, and Zoo Teen Coordinators will work with the participant to find a make-up shift in alternate weeks. Shifts can also be made up by signing up for a finite number of Zoo Teen Weekend shifts and special event opportunities in the fall.

If a Zoo Teen is unable to complete the required 45 hours within these defined shift opportunities for any reason, special scheduling will not be considered. **Therefore, it is important to be certain that a teen has adequate and consistent availability for work shifts before applying to the Zoo Teen Program.**

INCENTIVE TRIPS

Every summer, Zoo Teens are provided with the opportunity to participate in incentive trips as a reward for their hard work. These optional trips may include local excursions, and/or a visit to a larger metropolitan zoo in the Midwest. To participate in an incentive trip, Zoo Teens must meet eligibility requirements.

The 2026 Zoo Teen 'End of Summer' trip will be on August 1st. More information about this, and other incentive trip opportunities, will be made available throughout the season.

SELECTION PROCESS

Acceptance into the Zoo Teen program is competitive. Applications will be reviewed only if all materials are submitted by the application deadline.

Once the application deadline has passed, those candidates with complete materials will be emailed no later than March 20th, 2026 notifying them whether they have been selected to interview. Not all applicants will be invited to participate in an interview. Those selected will be prompted to attend one of two group interview sessions - either March 29th or April 11th. A candidate invited to interview must participate in order to remain in consideration for the program.

***Returning Zoo Teens are not required to attend the Group Interview.** Returning Zoo Teens in good standing may be excused from an individual interview. Coordinators will reach out individually to applicants by March 20th to schedule a brief virtual interview if needed.

Applicants will be notified of their acceptance status by e-mail no later than May 1, 2026.

Acceptance into the program is based upon multiple factors including eligibility status, timely submission of all application materials, quality of essay, teacher recommendation content, and performance in all mandatory interview components. Acceptance into the program is highly competitive and not all applicants will be selected for participation. Those not accepted are welcome to apply again in subsequent years.



READY TO APPLY?

The 2026 Zoo Teen application form is available on our website or by clicking [here](#).

Recommendations

As part of the application process, candidates are required to have two recommendations from two different adults. At least one recommendation must be from a current teacher (2025-2026 academic year). The other recommendation may be completed by a current or past teacher, coach, youth group leader, program mentor, or other non-related adult who knows the applicant in an educational and supervisory capacity. It is the candidate's responsibility to provide the following link to their designated adult recommenders who will then submit their forms electronically.

You can find the link to the online recommendation form here: [2026 Zoo Teen Recommendation Form](#)

Recommendations must be submitted no later than the application deadline.

APPLICATION DEADLINE- FRIDAY, MARCH 13th at 5:00pm

What's the next step?

Confirm the email you provided on the Zoo Teen Application and check that email account routinely for communication regarding your application status and other important messages. You will hear a response no later than March 20th.

QUESTIONS? Contact us via email: zooteen@lafayette.in.gov

THANK YOU FOR YOUR INTEREST IN COLUMBIAN PARK ZOO'S ZOO TEEN PROGRAM!



2026 ZOO TEEN IMPORTANT DATES

Before applying to the Zoo Teen program, please review the following dates to confirm availability. **These dates reflect mandatory training sessions and events that all participants must attend.**

All events will take place in the Bill and Donna DeFouw Education Center, located on Zoo grounds.

March 13th 5:00pm 2026 ZT Application Deadline

Candidates selected for an interview will be notified by email no later than March 20th, 2026.

***FIRST-YEAR PARTICIPANTS MUST ATTEND ONE GROUP AND ONE INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW:**

March 29th 1:00pm-4:00pm Group Interview (**In-Person**)
AND
 March 31st – April 3rd ~30 minutes* Individual Interviews (**via Zoom**)

OR

April 11th 1:00pm-4:00pm Group Interview (**In-Person**)
AND
 April 14th – April 17th ~30 minutes* Individual Interviews (**via Zoom**)

***Individual interviews scheduled following participation in the group interview in evenings**

May 1st Notification of Selected Participants

May 1st – 15th Participant Registration Period
 May 15th Registration and Program Fee Payment Due

TRAINING AND WORK SHIFT START DATES:

May 16th 9:00am – 4:00pm Fast-Track Training *for Returning Participants only*
 May 23rd Work shifts begin for Returning Participants who attend the Fast-Track Session
 June 1-5 1:00pm – 5:00pm 5-day Zoo Teen Training: mandatory for First Year Participants
 June 7th Work shifts begin for First Year Participants/Returners who attend training camp
 August 1st Zoo Teen Trip to larger metropolitan Zoo (Optional)
 August 9th Last day for regular summer work shifts

END OF SEASON OPPORTUNITIES:

August-December Designated Zoo Teen weekends available for extra/make-up shifts