

Tiger Forest opens at Zoo Knoxville

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Amy
McRary

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Video: Tiger Forest opens at Zoo Knoxville | 0:37

Eddie Mannis, chair of the board for Zoo Knoxville talks about the opening of Tiger Forest at Zoo Knoxville Friday, April 7, 2017.



Zoo Knoxville unveils Tiger Forest, the zoo's newest habitat facility for its Malayan tigers. Brianna Paciorka/News Sentinel



Zoo Knoxville's newest tiger Arya is trained in her habitat on Tuesday, March . 28, 2017. Brianna Paciorka/News Sentinel



5 things about tigers | 0:36



Zoo Knoxville gets new tiger for Tiger Forest | 1:26

Zoo Knoxville's third rare Malayan tiger arrived in East Tennessee on Thursday, Jan. 26, 2017. The zoo will open a new tiger exhibit, Tiger Forest, in April 2017. It is hoped the new tiger, a female, will mate with the zoo's existing Malayan tigers, two brothers, Bashir and Tanvir. Jack Lail/News Sentinel



Zoo Knoxville prepares for arrival of tiger | 0:36

Zoo Knoxville workers prepare for the arrival of Arya, a 3-year-old, 176-pound female Malayan tiger, who arrived at the Zoo on Thursday, Jan. 26, 2017. (Amy Smotherman Burgess / Zoo Knoxville) Amy Smotherman Burgess / Zoo Knoxville



Zoo Knoxville set to open Tiger Forest in April | 1:30

Zoo Knoxville visitors crowded inside Tiger Forest's temple Friday, craning their necks to see a 285-pound tiger creep from his den.

Cautiously Friday, 8-year-old male tiger Bashir stepped from his den into the exhibit's north habitat. The massive cat was tempted by a trail of raw meat chunks. Gobbling each bite, he seemed unaware of the attentive human throng. Then he turned. Through the exhibit's large glass window he spotted people standing only inches away.

The tiger glared. The people "OOOOO"ed. The tiger hissed. Then he turned on a big cat back paw and paced back to his den.

Minutes earlier zoo and government officials with park benefactors cut a bright orange ribbon to officially open the \$10 million, 1.5-acre Tiger Forest. The first habitat to open at the park in five years was funded with a combination of city, county and state funds and private contributions.

Designed with large glass windows into two outdoor habitats, Tiger Forest puts big cats and zoo visitors within inches of each other. Bashir has only been in his new homes a few weeks and hasn't gotten accustomed to having admirers so near.

Part of a four-acre Boyd Family Asian Trek area, Tiger Forest is the first exhibit in a master plan that aims to renovate or rebuild sections of the zoo. Asian Trek habitats for white-handed gibbons and languor monkeys, along with a 40-foot treehouse overlook, restaurant and public restrooms, open in 2018.



Calling Tiger Forest "a grand project from a grand vision," Zoo President and CEO Lisa New said the exhibit "is the best new animal experience of any zoo anywhere." New and Zoo Board Chairman Eddie Mannis noted that 474,000 people visited the park in 2016. Fifty-eight percent of those people were tourists who bought \$34 million worth of economic impact to the area, Mannis said.

City of Knoxville Mayor Madeline Rogero praised the habitat for its potential; Knox County Mayor Tim Burchett recalled the zoo's past.

"Tiger Forest takes our zoo to a whole new level," Rogero said during the opening ceremony.

"I grew up in Knoxville and we rarely, rarely came out here," Burchett said, praising the current zoo. "It wasn't what it is today."

Tiger Forest is home to three endangered Malayan tigers — Bashir, his brother Tanvir and 3-year-old, 183-pound female Arya. The zoo is part of an Association of Zoos and Aquariums Species Survival Plan for the endangered cats. Fewer than 400 of the tigers survive in the wild; about 60 live in zoos.

Asian Trek and a new long-planned reptile/amphibian education building and river otter habitat are the first projects in the 53-acre zoo's long-range construction. The zoo has raised \$21.4 million of the \$30 million needed to complete those projects.