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FRANKLIN TOWNSHIP

All kinds of critters

Silly Safaris delight youngsters and adults

By Julie Young
Star correspondent

"Jungle John" Cusson enjoys being wrong when introducing an animal to his audience.

"I tell them that I am going to show them something that is really fast, and then I pull out a tortoise," he said. "Kids love to correct adults."

He also tells kids he has dinosaurs, pulling out a bearded dragon or an alligator. When the kids argue that dinosaurs are extinct, that is his opportunity to find a volunteer "scientist" from the group to help with his demonstration.

"At that point you have to become more improvisational because the interaction shifts from the animals to the human side of things," he said.

"Jungle John" is the founder of Silly Safaris, a traveling, interactive animal show that lets children and adults see and touch animals such as skunks, kinkajous, cockroaches and Burmese pythons. "Jungle John" and his cohorts, "Alligator Aaron" Cleveland and "Safari Steve" Ahlrichs, tour schools, libraries, nursing homes, private events and other institutions throughout the year.

"I always liked playing with animals, so my career was doing animal shows in zoo venues," "Jungle John" said. "I worked at the Indianapolis Zoo for five years and made regular appearances on the radio before starting my own business (in 1997), which allows me to be more free creatively."

"Jungle John" said animal and human interactions in the Silly Safari experience are theatrical and playful. He said although kids can expect to see favorite animals, he always likes to bring along something different to show.

"It doesn't have to be more exotic necessarily," he said. "It just has to be something you don't see every day."

The kinkajous, for example, are similar to raccoons and native to South and Central America.

"Jungle John," "Alligator Aaron" and "Safari Steve" bring their menageries to schools and gear their shows to meet Indiana Department of Education standards.

"We'll do a rainforest show and talk about the geography and what kinds of animals they have there," said "Alligator Aaron," noting that kids often remember the animals' names

better than the presenters'. "We bring animals that fit a theme, but if it is a generic show, we bring whichever animals we like to work with."

The Silly Safari staff also offers a summer camp at Safari Station, the group's headquarters at 12104 Southeastern Ave. in Franklin Township. The camp lets children get up close and personal with some of the animals. The 7-acre property has outdoor pens, observation areas and an amphitheater. The campers also take field trips to the Fort Wayne Zoo and the Exotic Feline Rescue Center in Brazil, where campers get behind-the-scenes tours.

Lisa Jamison, a Fishers resident, said her family loves nature. Her son and daughter have attended camp at Safari Station. "I really liked the one-on-one interaction with the animals and the small ratio of children to adult counselors."

Jamison became familiar with Silly Safaris when the group entertained a Girl Scout troop. She said that despite the kinds of animals the kids would be around, she felt secure sending them to the camp.

"The staff was well-trained, and they reminded the campers all the time to wash their hands in case the animals could smell food on them."

Andrew Jamison, 9, used the name "Andrewphibian" at camp. He presented the chinchilla at the closing show. He is a snake lover at heart and said he enjoyed learning more about them.

"I pick up a lot of snakes on the trail, and I learned what types of snakes you can and cannot pick up," he said.

Katy Jamison, 12, said she enjoyed learning about skunks.

"They are unusual and different," Katy said. "At the closing show, I got to use the skunk, and the counselors used water guns to pretend the audience was getting sprayed."

"We focus as much on (kids) being public speakers and how to project as much as playing with animals," said "Alligator Aaron." "Some might walk in the door shy, but they walk out with their head held high."

Katy said she is eager to return. "I have friends going with me this year. They heard about it, and now they are going to try it."