

Celebrating the Georgia lifestyle

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Where the

Four attractions
aimed at animal
preservation and
conservation

BY BRET LOVE

PHOTOS BY BRET LOVE &

MARY GABBETT

Bella Grace Wathen, 2, daughter of C.W. and Kim Wathen, owners of Chestatee Wildlife Preserve, enjoys perching on a tame tortoise.

Inset: Shere Khan the tiger, Leo the lion and Baloo the bear share a nice abode at Noah's Ark in Locust Grove.



JAMA HEDGECOOTH



wild things are

The sluggish economy's impact on human beings has been well documented. What's less known is the impact the recession has had on organizations dedicated to rescuing and preserving animals whose previous owners can no longer take care of them.

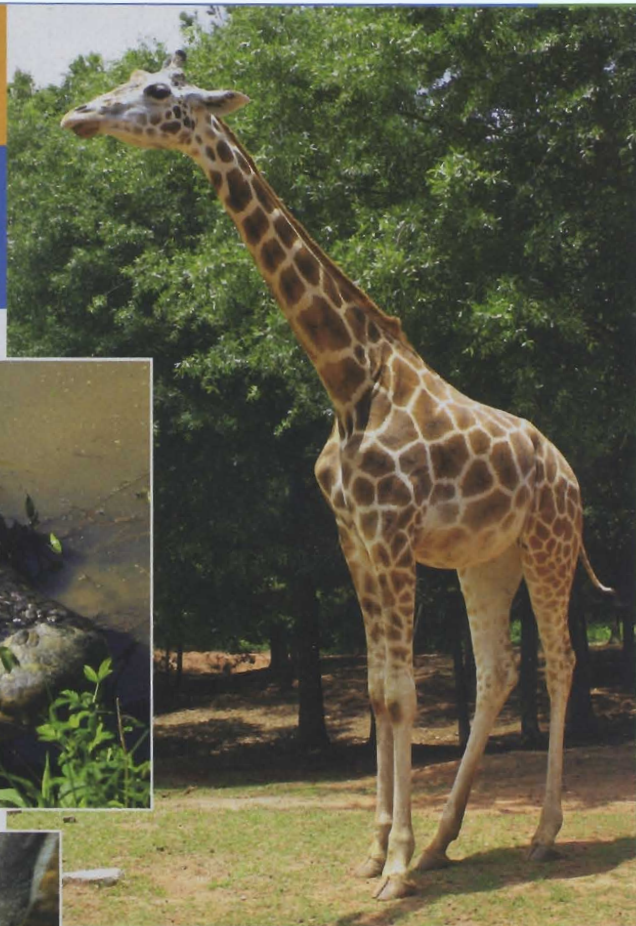
Whether it's the three adult tigers Noah's Ark recently inherited from a traveling circus, or the grizzly cub given to Chestatee Wildlife Preserve by a North Carolina facility that had five born in one season, these attractions are all devoted to ensuring that no animal gets left behind. At the same time, these centers educate future generations on the importance of wildlife conservation, and with charitable donations falling at a rapid rate, they need our patronage now more than ever.

Chestatee Wildlife Preserve

469 Old Dahlonega Highway, Dahlonega; (678) 859-6820; chestateewildlifepreserve.org

Founded by C.W. Wathen in 1992, this licensed exotic animal rescue and wildlife preserve sits on 20-plus acres of pristine rolling farmland in the foothills of the North Georgia mountains. Chestatee features more than 100 animals representing a broad variety of species, most of which are rescues from private owners, theme parks or locations with unsuitable living standards.

The preserve is clearly a labor of love for Wathen, his wife, Kim, and their volunteers, who strive to educate visitors on the importance



Top left: A gator catches some afternoon rays at Noah's Ark Animal Rehabilitation Center. **Above:** Pine Mountain Wild Animal Safari is the only place in the state where visitors can hand-feed giraffes. **Left:** A sweet deer eats right out of a visitor's hand at the Yellow River Game Ranch.

currently in the process of expanding their grizzly bear habitat, and recently completed work on an impressive new home (including swimming pool) for their pair of gorgeous white tigers. You can also expect to see wolves, lions, monkeys, ring-tailed lemurs, alligators and the occasional baby animal, the result of selective breeding.

Noah's Ark Animal Rehabilitation Center and Children's Care Homes

712 LG-Griffin Road, Locust Grove; (770) 957-0888; noahs-ark.org

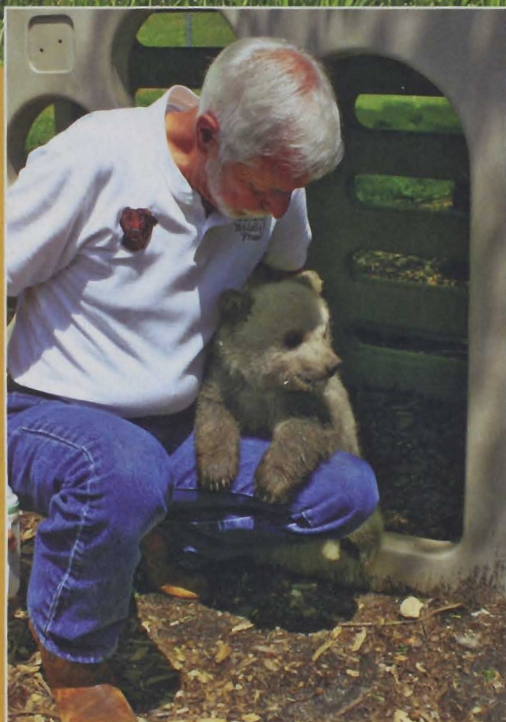
This unique facility, which features both an animal rehabilitation center and children's care homes, was founded by Jama Hedgecoth in 1978 and has been in its current location for 20 years. As the name

of conservation while imbuing them with a genuine passion for wildlife.

"The main reason we opened to the public was that we wanted to share the enjoyment we get from animals with other people," Wathen says.

"The kids get so much out of touching baby bunnies, snakes and birds. We have to start with the children and teach them the value of animals in the ecosystem."

The nonprofit organization is



At top: White tiger Georgia rests in the shade at Chestatee Wildlife Preserve a month before giving birth to two cubs. **Above:** C.W. Wathen of Chestatee Wildlife Preserve snuggles with 2-month-old grizzly bear cub Gus. **Above right:** A peacock shows off his colors at Pine Mountain Wild Animal Safari.

implies, the organization was designed to protect children and animals alike from abuse and neglect, and it relies purely on donations (rather than entrance fees) for funding.

The center has more than 1,000 animals spread across its 250 acres, but two animal attractions have garnered a good bit of attention: a young zebra named Evidence, who became famous as a baby in 2008 when he was found wandering on Interstate 75 after falling out of a truck and being hit by a car; and the unusual trio of Baloo (a black bear), Leo (a lion) and Shere Khan (a tiger), whose ability to coexist peacefully in the same habitat earned them a segment on the "Today" show.

"It's amazing to see these animals together," Hedgecoth says. "In

the nine years they've been at Noah's Ark, I've never seen them angry with one another. They play and rough 'n' tumble, but it's never crossed the line into aggression. What an amazing lesson we, as humans, can learn from them about living in peace together, in spite of our many differences."

But these scene-stealing stars also have an excellent supporting cast that includes monkeys, emus, alligators, wolves, llamas and free-roaming deer, as well as a small petting zoo for the kids.

Pine Mountain Wild Animal Safari

1300 Oak Grove Road,
Pine Mountain; (800)
367-2751; animalsafari.com

Georgians who remember when there was a Lion Country Safari here back in the '70s will love this drive-through zoo, which offers 200 acres filled

with more than 700 free-roaming animals (more than twice as many as Zoo Atlanta) from every continent except Antarctica.

Whether you use your own vehicle, rent one of the Zebra Vans or take the seasonally available guided tour bus, there's nothing quite like hand-feeding a slobbering American bison, elk, zebra or giraffe as they greet you along the way. The Walk-About section features dozens of other exotic animals kept at a slightly safer distance, including endangered species such as the Siberian tiger, water buffalo, Bactrian camel, spotted hyenas and a Southeast Asian ox called the ban-teng, as well as a remarkable collection of ligers (the species that results from mating a male lion and a female tiger).

Located approximately five

Alexandra Love, the author's daughter, feeds a friendly zebra through the car window at Pine Mountain Wild Animal Safari.



miles from Callaway Gardens, the 18-year-old park also boasts a Georgia Wildlife Museum featuring wildlife native to the state in a natural setting, as well as a restaurant and gift shop.

Yellow River Game Ranch

4525 Highway 78, Lilburn; (770) 972-6643; yellowrivergameranch.com

With approximately 600 animals on 24 acres just west of Stone Mountain Park on Highway 78, the Yellow River Game Ranch has been one of metro Atlanta's favorite family-friendly attractions for more than 20 years now.

"We loved dealing with animals," says owner Art Rilling, "and we wanted to show people the everyday things that you don't see in the city.

I grew up on a farm, but the modern generation doesn't see much of that stuff. It's a big deal for these kids when a deer or chicken comes up and wants to be fed."

The ranch separates itself from other preserves by specializing in birds and animals indigenous to Georgia, from white-tailed deer and black bears to buffalo, coyotes and birds of prey. But their most famous resident is undoubtedly one Gen. Beauregard Lee, the prognosticating groundhog with a 94-percent weather-predicting accuracy rate. Beau, who has been recognized for his public service by four Georgia governors and has twice been commended by the National Weather



A baby goat gets chummy with a duck at the Yellow River Game Ranch.

Service, is housed in a lavish white Southern minimansion with its own mailbox, water fountain and satellite dish. But, like most celebrities, his public appearances tend to be few and far between.

Fortunately, the ranch's other residents are much more personable, with deer, sheep, goats, pigs, donkeys, horses, rabbits, squirrels and chipmunks practically begging for hand-fed snacks, which can be purchased in the gift shop. 🐾

Freelance writer/photographer Bret Love has been covering Atlanta's arts, entertainment, travel and restaurant scene for 17 years for a variety of local and national publications.

A kid's-eye view

Our 8-year-old correspondent, Alexandra Love [the author's daughter], offers her opinion on these animal attractions:

Chestatee Wildlife Preserve:

"We got to hold a chinchilla and a cute baby ring-railed lemur. He was really soft and cuddly. [Two-month-old grizzly cub] Gus was a playful little rascal, running all over the place and splashing in mud puddles like a little kid. He was funny!"

Noah's Ark: "It was awesome to see that a bear, a lion and a tiger could all get along really well in the same cage. ... Some people tried to get too close to the deer and they'd run away, but if we walked slowly and calmly, they would let us get really close to them."

Pine Mountain Wild Animal Safari:

"You drive through and get to feed zebras, deer, pigs and other animals from your car. Watch out for the big cows and buffalos: If you're not careful, they might drool all over you! I loved the baby tigers."

Yellow River Game Ranch:

"My favorite animals were the deer, baby goats, chipmunks, foxes and black bears. I like how [some of] the animals will just eat right from your hand. Take lots of crackers, carrots and peanuts with you to feed them!"