

The St. Louis Zoo

One Government Drive

St. Louis, MO 63110

(314) 781-0900

<http://www.stlzoo.org>

Rating of Accessibility (out of 5 stars)

Overall Rating: 3.75 stars

- Accessible by Metro's bus routes: 4 stars
- Availability of docent-led tours upon request: 5 stars (untested)
- On-site docents and staff: 5 stars
- Ease of visibility of featured attractions: 3 stars
- Tactile and auditory components: 3 stars (under further evaluation)

This evaluation was conducted between November 13, 2009 and July 26, 2010 by Stephen Kissel, Blind Community Enrichment Associate for the St. Louis Lighthouse for the Blind, with the assistance of Mr. Wyndel Hill, Vice President of Internal Relations for the St. Louis Zoo, Mr. Robert Robins, the Zoo's Manager of Prospect Management and Research, and Ms. Elaine Gill, the Zoo's Manager of Volunteer Services.

Although a visit to the zoo tends to be a rather visual experience, the St. Louis Zoo should not immediately be discarded by blind or visually impaired individuals when selecting a day trip. Remaining one of only three large-scale zoos in the nation to offer free general admission to the public, the St. Louis Zoo houses a wide variety of wild and exotic animals and offers an entertaining and interactive selection of shows, exhibits, and attractions. The wide availability of the docents and a small selection of tactile and auditory components help to enhance a blind or visually impaired visitor's experience, but sighted assistance remains necessary within this spacious and very visual tourist attraction.

If traveling by public transportation, blind or visually impaired visitors will find the St. Louis Zoo relatively accessible. The Number 90 Metro bus stops at Government and Fine Arts Drive, placing pedestrians about a hundred yards west of the Living World entrance. A more detailed set of walking directions from the bus stop to the Living World entrance will need to be obtained in order to properly orient the sight-impaired individual if traveling independently. Metro's Call-A-Ride service, cabs, and other sighted drivers should be able to drop off passengers within a much closer proximity to the entrance. However, the extensiveness of the zoo's grounds and the

scarcity of tactile sidewalk boundaries, such as landscaping, curbs, and changes in the texture of the ground, present several obstacles to blind travelers. In the case of the railroad crossings, these navigational difficulties can present a potential safety hazard. As a result, blind and visually impaired individuals should not attempt to navigate the Zoo unaccompanied.

If a sight-impaired individual cannot acquire a sighted companion, it is possible to arrange in advance for a docent to aid in the individual's exploration of the Zoo. As a courtesy to the staff and volunteers, it is preferred that the Zoo receive two weeks advanced notice of a request for this service. This will allow the docent to properly prepare a tour that will be as interesting and meaningful for the blind or visually impaired individual as possible.

As many of the animals are featured in a recreation of their natural habitats, it can often be difficult for low-vision individuals to spot them. Binoculars and monoculars can sometimes improve the chances of a visually impaired individual being able to catch glimpses of the wildlife, but this varies greatly, depending on proximity and the animal's ability to camouflage itself with its surroundings. Although most of the signage contains large print and high-contrast colors, it may still be advisable, as a precaution, for a low-vision individual to bring some kind of magnifying device for use on the animal name plates.

Despite the remoteness of some of the featured animals and the informational text, the Zoo does offer a small selection of features which can enhance a blind or visually impaired visitor's experience if assisted by a sighted individual. For individuals or groups exploring the Zoo's grounds on their own, docents can be found mingling with tourists throughout the Zoo. These experienced, well-trained volunteer staff members possess a wealth of fascinating information about the animals. They are very easy to engage in casual conversation, and the information gained by talking to them far exceeds the basic information found on the animal name plates. One popular attraction at the zoo is a narrated train tour. For any visitor, regardless of visual capabilities, this serves as an excellent way to observe the wide variety of animals which inhabit the St. Louis Zoo. The tour guides adequately inform passengers about the facility's diverse animal population, and they are very quick to point out any visible wildlife. The petting zoo offers an opportunity to interact with several miniature animals, and Caribbean Cove allows visitors to get a close look at, touch, and feed a small variety of sea creatures, including sting rays, in a very safe and supervised environment. Additionally, a front row seat at any of the animal shows, such as the sea lion show, will give visually impaired visitors an up close and personal look at some of the featured inhabitants of the St. Louis Zoo.

Tactile representations of featured animals are scarce, but there are a few that blind visitors will find very appealing. For example, locations such as the entrances to the Penguin House, Insectarium, and Children's Zoo feature large metal sculptures of a signature creature. The hippo's habitat has a rather unique display. In addition to listing several fun facts about features of the hippo's head, the display is also adorned with a life-sized cast of the hippo's head. Although a blind individual will require assistance in reading the text, the cast adds a fascinating tactile component that adds a whole new level of dimension to the information on display. Exhibits like this one are rare, but blind or visually impaired individuals should be sure to visit the gift shop where they can examine figurines, masks, and plush toys of many featured animals.

The Zoo's Education Building contains countless animal relics (skulls, feathers, and dried droppings to name a few) which are used for educational programs. These are at the disposal of

docents who may be giving private or group tours, and during favorable weather conditions, carts of animal artifacts can be found traveling through the Zoo. These artifacts also have the potential to be used in special presentations for school groups. All of these factors offer a goldmine of opportunities for blind and visually impaired individuals to explore and examine a wide variety of wild and exotic animals. One might not be able to safely feel a live crocodile or bear, but one would easily be able to handle a preserved skull or piece of hide. Teachers and group leaders should be sure to ask about these additional tactile components when scheduling a visit or educational session, especially if their group or class contains a student or group of students who may be blind or visually impaired.

There is so much to see and do at the St. Louis Zoo that a person could easily spend an entire day there. For such occasions, the Living World contains a cafeteria-style restaurant, and several hot dog stands may be found throughout the grounds. None of these vendors have Braille or large print menus, but the workers are very helpful in accommodating blind individuals, making it easy to place an order in a timely manner. The Living World's café is currently considering obtaining a Braille and large-print menu to benefit blind and visually impaired visitors, but this has not been completely confirmed or finalized. If obtained, this menu would be similar to the Braille and large-print menus found at the Powell Symphony Hall and at the Muny.

The Zoo is preparing to undergo some major renovations, especially to the elephant and polar bear housing. At such a crucial time for the Zoo's expansion and development, the Department of Internal Relations and the Department of Volunteer Services are beginning to re-examine the Zoo's overall accessibility for visitors, volunteers, interns, and employees with disabilities. Blindness represents one key issue that is to be addressed; and through these efforts, the managerial staff at the St. Louis Zoo hopes to find new ways to utilize many senses in ways that would make its presentation of the shows, exhibits, and animals more appealing, engaging, and meaningful for all visitors. More information will be made available as developments progress.

Before visiting, be sure to check out the Zoo's website. It contains a great deal of valuable and interesting information about the St. Louis Zoo, its animals, shows, attractions, schedules, and much more. The site is well organized and functions extremely well with screen enlarging and screen reading software.

For any questions about any of the services noted above, or for updates on forthcoming enhancements, please contact one of the following department heads.

Mr. Wyndel Hill, Vice President of Internal Relations

Phone: (314) 646-4571

E-mail: hill@stlzoo.org

Ms. Elaine Gill, Manager of Volunteer Services

Phone: (314) 646-4661

E-mail: gill@stlzoo.org