

Some clever chimps stage escape at Kansas City Zoo

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A chimpanzee climbs a tree at the Onstead Foundation Chimpanzee Habitat at the Houston Zoo in Texas. AP Photo/David J. Phillip

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Seven chimps made a break for it at the Kansas City Zoo Thursday. But it wasn't careless zookeepers who were responsible for the escape. Instead, it was clever chimpanzees, said zoo director Randy Wisthoff.

That, at least, was Wisthoff's explanation for the escape of seven chimpanzees from their enclosure on Thursday afternoon — not careless zookeepers.

The clever chimps caused a “Code Red” response by zoo employees and an hourlong lockdown of zoo visitors.

Branching Out

“Chimps are so smart,” Wisthoff said.

The chimpanzees escaped after one of them, he said, either found or broke off a 5- or 6-foot log or branch, leaned it against a wall, and climbed to the top. That chimpanzee — the “ringleader,” Wisthoff called him — persuaded six friends to join him up there.

At one point, three of the seven chimps went over the wall into an area accessible only to zoo employees. Well before then, however, the zoo set in motion its emergency plans, which includes gathering visitors into locked and secure areas.

At no time were any of the zoo visitors in danger, Wisthoff said.

The breakout happened at about 3:30 p.m., and it took an hour for zookeepers to herd the animals, in groups of two or three, back into their area.

A Timely Coincidence

The chimps were lured with fruit and greens such as carrots, celery and lettuce, their usual food.

“It was almost their dinnertime already,” Wisthoff said.

But one of the chimps was unwilling to return home. So for that last reluctant animal, zookeepers brought out a bag of malted milk balls.

“That was the clincher,” Wisthoff said.

All employees were aware that chimpanzees can be dangerous, Wisthoff said. Of the seven, the largest weighed about 150 pounds, and they are tremendously strong, he said.

On Friday, the 100-acre area normally occupied by 12 chimpanzees was closed. Zoo employees checked to make sure there were no escape routes.

Employees are usually careful to check the area and remove large branches, Wisthoff said. That made him wonder whether the branch or log used Thursday had been broken off recently.

"An Hour In The Birdcage"

About 1,800 people visited the zoo Thursday. Those who remained stayed put during the lockdown.

“We spent an hour in the birdcage,” said the Rev. Celeste Ward, pastor of Emmanuel Repentance Temple of Kansas City, who was visiting with family members. Zoo employees respectfully explained the emergency, she said, and gave them several free zoo passes.

Over in the penguin exhibit, visitor Mari Cintron easily kept three children entertained for the hour they were locked in there.

“We just visited with the penguins,” she said. “It was very calm.”

But while some visitors spent the hour enjoying animals, Brie Huffman of Raymore, Mo., was stuck with two friends and many others in a food storage area. Although she grew tired of the smell of animal feed, she appreciated the eight free zoo passes given to her.

The free tickets are good until Dec. 31, and Huffman said she will be using all of them.