

# The hour of the chimp at KC 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 afternoon.

But it wasn't careless zookeepers who were responsible for the escape. Instead, it was clever chimpanzees.

That, at least, was zoo director Randy Wisthoff's explanation for the escape.

Until they were rounded up, the clever chimps caused a "Code Red" and an hourlong lockdown of zoo visitors.

## **An Afternoon Breakout**

"Chimps are so smart," Wisthoff said.

The chimps escaped after one of them either found or broke off a 5- or 6-foot log or branch. The chimp leaned it against a wall, and climbed to the top. Then 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 only zoo workers can enter. Well before then, however, the zoo set in motion its emergency plans, which included gathering visitors into locked areas.

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

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

The chimps were lured with fruit and vegetables, including carrots, celery and lettuce.

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

### **Last One "Bagged"**

Most of the chimps went back quietly. One chimp, though, was unwilling to go back, so zookeepers brought out a bag of malted milk balls.

“That was the clincher,” Wisthoff said.

All the workers know that chimps 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. The area is equal to the size of 75 football fields. Zoo workers checked to make sure there were no more escape routes for the chimps to get out.

The workers are 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.

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

### **Time Well Spent**

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

Zoo visitor Mari Cintron was visiting the penguin exhibit when the chimps escaped. She easily kept three children entertained during the hour they were locked in there.

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

Some visitors, like Cintron and Ward, spent the hour enjoying animals. But Brie Huffman, who lives in Missouri, for instance, was stuck with two friends and many others in a food storage area. She grew tired of the smell of animal food. But she appreciated the eight free zoo passes that were given to her.

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