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NEWSDAY INVESTIGATION

Former Holtsville zoo workers describe 'abysmal' animal enclosures, unlicensed procedures

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'Many of the wild animals developed these kind of neurotic, repetitive behaviors'

Former Holtsville Wildlife & Ecology Center employees have described filthy enclosures, untreated medical problems and more. Newsday environment reporter Tracy Tullis has the story. Credit: Newsday/John Paraskevas; Anthony Florio

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After an American black bear named Honey was euthanized last month at the Holtsville Ecology Site and Animal Preserve, Brookhaven Town released a tribute to "our cherished bear who brought joy and inspiration to so many." But Sarah Winter, an animal caretaker at the facility until just before the bear's death, told Newsday that Honey had suffered for years without pain medication from arthritis, chronic urinary tract infections and cracked and rotten teeth.

By day she would often retreat to a corner of the pen, Winter said, where she was partially hidden from the crowds. She often swayed from side to side, a neurotic behavior that experts say develops when captive animals are stressed. At night she was ushered into a barren concrete stall.

Seven former assistant animal caretakers — five who spoke on the record and two who asked not to be identified because of concerns about future employment in wildlife management — said Honey's predicament was typical at the Holtsville facility. During several hours of interviews and in a 120-page document with photographs, the employees described dozens of examples of what they called neglect toward wild animals such as a Eurasian lynx and arctic foxes, as well as rabbits, turtles, goats, roosters and even domestic house cats.

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Animals were kept in filthy enclosures, medical problems were ignored for weeks or months, and surgical procedures were performed without anesthetic by staff who lacked formal veterinary training or licenses, the former employees, who worked between 2021 and last month, told Newsday.

WHAT NEWSDAY FOUND

- **Former animal caretakers** at the Holtsville Ecology Site and Animal Preserve have documented what they said are dozens of instances of untreated illnesses and injuries, and said unlicensed staff performed medical procedures without anesthetic.
- **The Brookhaven Highway Department**, which runs the zoo, defended the site and described it as "really an incredible facility that thousands and thousands of people visit every year."
- **A local animal welfare group** argued the zoo should be shut down and its animals sent to accredited sanctuaries. The group said it has found placement for all 110 animals.

"There are so many animals living in conditions that are just abysmal," Cayleigh Kunnmann, who worked as a caretaker from June 2022 until August 2024, told Newsday. When she and other workers raised concerns with the senior staff about animals' declining health or filthy enclosures, she said, "a lot of the time you really get brushed off."

Several of the caretakers said they were disturbed by senior staff who are not licensed veterinarians or veterinary technicians cutting into animals' infected feet without providing pain medication.

The zoo is owned by the Town of Brookhaven and operated by the town's highway department. Newsday sent Highway Superintendent Daniel Losquadro a list of the former caretakers' allegations in requesting comment. His response did not address most of their complaints, but he provided the following statement to Newsday: "All care of the animals at the Ecology Site is performed by, under the direction of, or approved by, a licensed veterinarian. When required, a large animal veterinarian is consulted, as well."

Losquadro added, "Those who are opposed to the existence of zoos and are committed to their closure should be honest and make that philosophical argument instead of resorting to slander and defamation."

Several former employees said they were not opposed to zoos in principle and that their criticisms were directed specifically at the ecology site.

In an interview, Losquadro said the zoo is "really an incredible facility that thousands and thousands of people visit every year."

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Various animal enclosures at the Town of Brookhaven's Holtsville Ecology Site and Animal Preserve are shown in this aerial photo on Wednesday. Credit: Newsday

The ecology site evolved from a leaf composting facility organized by the highway department, according to the Brookhaven online archive. The operation was moved in the 1980s to a former landfill in Holtsville, and the department later added a collection of animals. Today the facility "has over 100 injured or non-releasable wild animals and farm animals that are available for viewing," according to the town's website. The zoo houses "exotics" such as a coatiundi, emus, foxes, a bison and a bobcat; birds of prey; and domesticated animals including cows and chickens.

The facility is not accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, which requires members to adhere to certain standards of animal welfare and veterinary care and mandates the institution engage in field conservation efforts. According to the AZA, the Holtsville zoo has never applied for accreditation. Losquadro said in an emailed statement: "It is not a required accreditation for any of the licenses that we hold."

Admission is free. This year the Holtsville Ecology Site had operating expenses of \$1.18 million and took in a little less than \$219,000 in special event fees, donations and a state grant, according to town records; the rest was paid from the Brookhaven Highway Department's budget.

Cramped, soiled enclosures

The former employees described pens they said were too small, poorly maintained and infrequently cleaned. The pens of the "exotics" were cleaned roughly once a week, Winters said, because there are too few staff to do the work. The space where two barred owls most often sit had been cleaned only once in two years, the document said, and the bobcat's back enclosure "reeks of cat urine and feces." Rabbits and other small animals "would be living in piles of their own feces for days," said Kathleen Connolly, another former caretaker.

The wolf-dog hybrids, which are bred as pets but are not suited to domesticated life or to life in the wild, are housed in cages next to the park, where they are subjected to loud music and shouting from large camp groups, Winter said.

She said they often appeared stressed, pacing their cages and sometimes retreating "in the back corner, huddled together," Winter said. The owls and other birds of prey, the bobcat and lynx also tried to retreat to the far corners of their cages, the former employees said, away from the visitors; the bobcat preferred to stay in her back enclosure to the exposed front part of her pen, but she was frequently shut out of that space during the day.

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The Eurasian lynx at the Holtsville Ecology Site in his back enclosure. Former employees said the wild animals are rarely given enrichment activities to keep them occupied. Credit: Provided by former zoo employees

"Wild animals are not supposed to share space with humans," Liz Tyson, the animal welfare and advocacy director of the wildlife charity Born Free USA, told Newsday. "It's natural for them to want to get away." Not providing hiding spaces "is really failing to provide a significant welfare need of all animals. "

Few of the animals were given toys or other "enrichment" activities, the caretakers said, which are required of zoos accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums to allow for "species-appropriate behavioral opportunities," according to the AZA standards manual.

"The enrichment there is very minimal," Connolly said, "so a lot of the animals display signs of zoochosis" — such as bobbing, pacing and swaying. These repetitive behaviors are commonly seen in "animals kept in inappropriate environments" that do not allow them to exercise their natural instincts, Tyson said, and are a kind of self-soothing — "a way of the animals coping with their situation."

When visitors asked why Honey bobbed and swayed from side to side, Kunnmann said, "often you could hear staff explaining to the public that she's dancing."

"That's really so disrespectful of the animals' suffering to trivialize it like that," Tyson said. "Because it's a serious indicator of mental distress. "

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Ex-workers: Procedures performed by unlicensed staff

The former caretakers said many of the ducks, chickens and roosters at the zoo suffered from pododermatitis or bumblefoot, an infection of the feet; risk factors for the condition include "damp or unsanitary bedding litter,"

"excessive accumulation of feces," and hard floor surfaces, according to a recent article in the journal Avian Health and Disease.



Stefan, a rooster at the Holtsville zoo, had chronic infections on his feet, workers said. Credit: Provided by former zoo employees

A rooster named Stefan, who like most of the ducks and chickens at the zoo lives in a concrete pen, was one of the more severe cases, several of the former caretakers said. He "has several large, painful, necrotic pressure sores," the workers' document notes. "His feet are swollen, caked in feces, and hot to the touch."

The two senior staff, animal preserve caretakers Kayla Petrone and Kristin Layer, have frequently cut out the infected tissue on Stefan's and other birds' feet with a scalpel that had not been sterilized and without anesthetic, according to Winter, who worked at the zoo in the summer of 2023 and again from May until mid-November. A photo in the caretakers' document shows a woman whom it identifies as Layer working on a duck's foot with a metal tool.

By comparison, at the Evelyn Alexander Wildlife Rescue Center in Hampton Bays, birds with bumblefoot are treated with antibiotics, epsom salt soaks and medicated salves. They would also be given pain medication, said Jessica Chiarello, the center's hospital supervisor.

Only veterinarians are permitted to perform any type of surgery, according to the American Veterinary Medical Association. William Kuhs, a veterinarian who practices in Southold and worked at zoos before vet school, said that to have unlicensed staff perform even minor surgical procedures, especially without anesthetic, is "totally inappropriate."

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Neither Petrone nor Layer is a veterinarian or a vet tech, Losquadro confirmed. He said procedures at the zoo are conducted with the "understanding" and "approval" of John Corso, a vet who practices at the Towne Line Veterinary Group in Hauppauge.

Corso sometimes examined and treated animals at the zoo and other times would give directions to staff over the phone without examining the animal, Winter said.

Corso did not respond to several attempts to reach him for an interview. Messages left at the zoo requesting interviews with Petrone, Layer and April Perry, the foreman, were not returned.



The entrance to the Town of Brookhaven's facility on Wednesday. Credit: Newsday photo

In February 2023, Petrone and Layer cut four roosters' spurs (bony growths similar to claws), according to the former employees' document. Chiarello said spurs can be safely trimmed but will bleed if the vessel inside is cut. Bloody spurs should be wrapped, and the birds given pain relief and kept indoors, she said. The document recounts that after the procedure the roosters were put outside during a snowstorm. The next morning one of the birds was found dead, with blood around him.

Kunmann said that Layer over-trimmed a goat's hooves "to the point where blood [was] pouring down her arms." According to the document, after caretakers complained to Perry, the goat, named Cleo, was seen by a vet who prescribed pain medication. After that incident, caretakers said Cleo's hooves were not maintained; videos shared with Newsday show her walking awkwardly on overgrown hooves.

Kunmann said she left the job in August after becoming increasingly "frustrated and depressed" about the conditions there. She now works with service dogs.

Sick animals ignored

The caretakers described more than three dozen cases of neglect and untreated medical conditions from the past two years, many of them documented with photographs, including parakeets dying of exposure, rabbits with painful rashes called "wet tail," untreated lesions in an arctic fox's lungs, and a domestic cat with a persistent rasping cough who was kept tied up all day.

In February, Kunmann brought Nussy, a Pekin duck, to the Evelyn Alexander hospital for evaluation after she'd been found lying on her back and was unable to stand. Chiarello found the duck had infected feet, a "mangled" wing from an old fracture, a bone infection and lead poisoning. She was treated for bumblefoot and started on chelation therapy to remove the lead from her system, but the zoo insisted on taking her back before the treatment was complete. She continued to have poor mobility after her return, Kunmann said.

A pig called Wilbur was "extremely lame," Kunmann said, due to deep abscesses in his feet. A vet — not Corso — examined him and advised euthanasia, "as the sheer weight of his body was causing deep hoof cracks leading to abscesses," according to the caretakers' document, "and continuous sedation to treat these abscesses would eventually kill him." That suggestion was ignored for more than a year and eventually Wilbur began to walk on his knees, Kunmann said. He was finally euthanized in July.



Wilbur, a pig at the Holtsville zoo, suffered from a deep puncture wound from something within his enclosure, according to former workers. Credit: Provided by former zoo employees

The employees' document recounts the case of a goat called Snickers, who in March 2023 developed a large abscess on his neck, which appears in several photos as an enormous swollen lump. Layer "tried popping it herself," without administering pain medicine, according to the account. When this attempt was unsuccessful, Snickers was sedated by a vet and the abscess was drained. Snickers died of an untreated respiratory illness in February, according to the document.

USDA inspections

Although the Holtsville facility is not accredited by the AZA, like all animal "exhibitors," it is regulated under the 1966 Animal Welfare Act and must be licensed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Losquadro said in his statement to Newsday: "We are a fully licensed and regulated facility in compliance with all of our permits."

But the ASPCA, World Animal Protection and other animal welfare organizations have argued that Animal Welfare Act standards are vague and do not meaningfully protect the well-being of animals in captivity. A space large enough for a lynx to walk 10 feet could be considered "adequate" even if he might travel 10 miles in a day in the wild. The law requires enrichment for primates only; a bobcat or a bear can be confined in a cage for decades with nothing to occupy them without triggering a violation.

A review of USDA inspection reports for the past 10 years found that the Holtsville zoo was cited six times for poorly maintained pens, including broken concrete flooring, cracked viewing glass, sharp fence edges, rotten floorboards and fencing on the bear enclosure that was too low. That number is roughly in line with the average over the past 10 years for the 12 accredited zoos in New York.

The USDA conducts scheduled inspections during the licensing process for facilities, as well as unannounced inspections, according to Lyndsay Cole, the assistant director for public affairs at the agency's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service. Connolly said in the days before the most recent licensing inspection in June, the staff kicked into high gear to prepare. "I remember that whole week people were going crazy cleaning everything," she said. "There were things that hadn't been cleaned in over a month."

Cole wrote in an email: "Animal Care inspectors evaluate the health and well-being of animals by direct observation of animals and facilities, interviews with facility staff and veterinary personnel, and review of relevant records."

Daniel Waltz, managing attorney at the Animal Legal Defense Fund, said inspectors don't have time to examine every animal, so poor health or wounds could easily be missed. Furthermore, he said, "how do you assess

inadequate veterinary care if one example of inadequate veterinary care is an animal gets sick and isn't treated and dies?" The inspector is not likely to witness the death of a neglected animal.

A possibility of sanctuary

The former caretakers said they would like the animals in Holtsville to have a different future. Several of them, along with John Di Leonardo, the president of the animal welfare group Humane Long Island, met between September and November with Brookhaven Town Councilmember Jonathan Kornreich, Supervisor Dan Panico and Chief Deputy Highway Superintendent Steve Tricarico, to raise their concerns. Perry, the foreman of the Holtsville facility, attended the final meeting.

The former employees presented their 120-page document, which they hoped would persuade the town and the highway department to transfer all the animals to accredited sanctuaries, where they would have more space and more attentive veterinary care.

Di Leonardo wrote in an email: "The future of zoos is sanctuaries — facilities that emphasize individual welfare for animals rescued from dire situations." He said he has secured placements in accredited sanctuaries for all 110 animals housed at the site.



Goats in their habitat on Wednesday. Credit: Newsday photo

The lynx, for example, would live out his days at the Wildcat Sanctuary in Minnesota, which is accredited by the Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries, which Tyson said sets rigorous standards for animal welfare. There he could have a 6,000-square-foot enclosure, said Tammy Thies, the sanctuary director, with natural plantings and an enrichment program. The sanctuary has an on-site hospital and full-time vet.

Chiarello, who has rehabilitated and released "many hundreds" of wild animals over the past six years at Evelyn Alexander, said that some of the animals at Holtsville could be candidates for release, including the marten, the woodchuck, and several of the birds of prey that appear to fly well. "It's a big decision whether you're going to keep these animals in a cage for the rest of their lives," she said.

Panico told Newsday: "If there is an opportunity to place animals in locations that would be better for the animal, I would be open to that."

But Di Leonardo said the highway department representatives, Perry and Tricarico, dismissed the idea of closing the zoo, and that neither would look at the document the employees had prepared or the photos. When Kornreich asked Perry and Tricarico if they would agree to send just the lynx to the Wildcat Sanctuary, they said no.

Kornreich told Newsday that while he understands many people have enjoyed visiting the zoo, it "exists to serve the needs of animals and not just to put them on display." He said the town should consider "what's best for each individual animal."

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