**CRITTER CORNER**

By: Rachael Komulainen, Park Animal Keeper

Happy Spring, everyone! Before going into current updates, I would like to take a moment to talk about some of our successes in 2019, since I did not write about them at the end of the year. Last year, we were very industrious in the Barnyard. We got a lot of projects started on the long-term To-Do List, with a few even getting completed. The first section of our new bison perimeter fence was erected. This fence is VERY EXPENSIVE, so it will take a while to get to the finish line – but we got off to a great start! Another one of my personal goals, since I started at Hart Park 7 years ago, has been to set up a memorial area for our critters. It is important to recognize the contributions of our critter family, even after they have departed us. Therefore, with the help of 3 different Eagle Scouts, this memorial area has become reality! It is located directly behind Fritz’s Graveyard. So far, 2 of the 3 Eagle Scouts have completed their portions – and it looks fabulous! A big shout out to: Leo Salazar – for creating the pathway, installing a bench, and making the memorial board in my head become a reality! And, a second, big shout out to: Steven Solitare – for installing a solar powered fountain, installing an already existing bench, taking out a chunk of old chainlink fencing that he replaced with a retaining wall, and painting the interior of “Deer Abby’s” house and adding a perch for her food dish. Both Eagle Scouts did an AWESOME JOB! But…there is still 1 more to come! I don’t want to spoil any surprises, so you will have to wait and see the final product, once the other Eagle Scout finishes his respective part of the project area. Again, it is thrilling to see our departed loved ones honored, and we want to invite everyone to come check it out! Thirdly, I did want to acknowledge that we acquired a few new animals in September of 2019, with the swans and an emu being new species to Hart Park. Please come check out all our animals and see if you can spot the new-to-us critters. Additionally, we had AMAZING partnerships with the community that continued to grow and prosper in 2019. I want to put out a word of THANKS to the following:

\*All the wonderful, dedicated volunteers that continue to make Hart Park the gem of Santa Clarita – with a special mention to the LDS Missionaries for volunteering two days per week for 2 hours each time, with 4-8 people. All our volunteers make us shine and we are so very grateful for their contributions!

\*Our partnership with local Eagle Scouts continues to be a win/win situation! Each Scout gets to grow and learn doing his project, and the park receives a finished project. Just between 2019 and 2020 (thus far), I worked with 20+ Eagle Scouts. Some projects are planned far in advance and others materialize quickly – either way, Hart Park really appreciates being the recipient of their projects!

\*Our partnership with Santa Clarita Grocery has been wonderful! We get donated produce once a week to give our critters. Even though, all our critters are given a 100% healthy diet – provided through hay/pellets/etc. – it is, in my belief, CRUCIAL to give fresh produce as part of an animal’s diet. It is natural for them to eat, it is additional nutrition, and (most importantly) it is mentally stimulating to have something new and different. We THANK Santa Clarita Grocery for all their donations toward our critters!

There were so many successes in 2019 that it would be impossible to list everything, so please know that the above listed projects/partnerships/etc. are just a sample of all the great stuff happening in the Barnyard at Hart Park!

Now, for 2020: We are continuing several projects from 2019. The biggest project coming up (that has been in the planning stages for a while) is the Waterfowl Habitat Renovation Project. In the near future, you will see active construction going on in the duck pen. I am super excited about this project! At this time, I won’t go into specifics but…suffice it to say, it will be a real improvement from the existing, antiquated enclosure. We are going to modernize, beautify, and cater to the best interests of the birds, with this project. It will take several months, once it starts, so please be patient with the process. Also, I would like to address the continued quarantine for the birds. The virulent Newcastle Disease quarantine has been in effect for over a year now – and there is no end in sight, unfortunately. In January, there was a new case found in L.A. County, so we continue to be stuck in quarantine limbo. We did, however, modify the quarantine fencing in February. This new modification allowed us to reinforce the birds’ enclosures with fencing, which now permits patrons to walk through the entire Barnyard again – uninterrupted by aisleway fences. In effect, the entire Barnyard is back open! Yeah! Just a reminder, though: As part of this quarantine, we are NOT permitted to sell the pellets to feed the animals. The revenue generated from the sale of these pellets in the Gift Shop and the pellet dispensers was set up to take care of some of the animals’ needs not covered by L.A. County. If you wish to make a donation toward this fund, please contact FOHP directly.

I tried to include several pictures of our staff and volunteers, so you get an idea of the GREAT TEAM we have taking care of the Barnyard! Again, a big THANK YOU to all the staff and volunteers for their dedication and hard work – the animals thank you and I thank you! On April 19th & 20th, during The Cowboy Festival, we will, once again, be conducting Barnyard Tours and doing Animal Presentations for the public. I encourage everyone to stop by the Barnyard for a visit, a tour, and a possible meet-and-greet with a critter!