



# The Crash

## June 2023 "Summer Edition"

The IRKA newsletter: the leading network connecting rhino keepers.

### President's Perspective

I can't believe that the Rhino Keeper Workshop has already come and gone. Words cannot express how exciting it was to have everyone back together to share all our knowledge about rhinos. It was one of our largest workshops with almost 140 delegates in attendance, with a majority of delegates in attendance for their first time! We had amazing presentations ranging from facility focuses, changing elephant exhibits into rhino exhibits, modern husbandry advancements, AIRS updates, collecting from male rhinos via standing sedation, and conservation updates from the field. The RKW auction was another huge success with raising \$7,300! Those funds will now go towards the next RKW in 2025. I would like to thank all the delegates, keynote speakers, presenters, sponsors, The Wilds staff, and volunteers for making it one of the most memorable experiences. The countdown is already on for the next workshop so stay tuned!!

As discussed at the membership meeting during the RKW, the IRKA Board of Directors proposed a by-law change which was then voted for approval, that will increase the board by 2 professional members. As the IRKA expands its projects, we needed the additional help to keep our current projects going while adding on to our work load. The election process is currently ongoing and the newly elected board members will begin their 3-year term September 1st. I would like to encourage all of the professional members to vote for those to move the IRKA forward.

For those who weren't able to join us at the workshop, where Parker Pennington presented on the American Institute of Rhinoceros Science (AIRS) project, she was kind enough to write an article to update us on the status of the research. It was exciting to learn that there are over 60 institutions and 190 rhinos participating in this research. If you would like to know more about the AIRS project, make sure to read Parker's article in this newsletter.

There are a few changes to the Executive Committee on the IRKA that will be starting September 1st 2023. According to the by-laws, no one shall exceed 2 consecutive terms in the same position on the executive team (President, Vice President, Treasurer, and Secretary). Three out of the four of us have come to the end of our 2 consecutive terms. Chris Tubbs as Treasurer, Chris Bobko as Vice

President, and myself as President. I can't thank Chris Tubbs and Chris Bobko enough for all of their dedication and hard work in their current roles. I would like to congratulate Chris Bobko as being voted on as the newly elected President!! Chris Bobko is the last founding member serving on the board and the IRKA couldn't be in better hands! She has all of the historical knowledge on how this organization was made and well over 30 years' experience working with rhinos! Congratulations, Chris! I can't wait to see what else you can do with the IRKA under your leadership! Replacing Chris Bobko's VP role is



### Table of Contents:

#### President's Perspective

Joe Hauser

#### BOD election timeline

#### Audubon Zoo

Chris St. Romain

#### RKW Fundraising success!

Angie Snowie & Chris Bobko

#### AIRS Update

Parker Pennington

#### Volunteer Committee Updates

Jason Faessler

#### Article Review:

*SWR microbiomes*

Correspondence

New Members

Conservation Partners

Cassy Kutilek from Lincoln Park Zoo! Cassy is a force of nature and full of endless energy that has taken on many roles within the IRKA including website, social media, RKW committee (countless roles), webinars, and so much more. Whenever there was a task that needed to be done, Cassy was on it. Lastly, Cody Cspelo from The Wilds, and the RKW Chair for this past workshop will be replacing Chris Tubbs as Treasurer. Cody did an outstanding job as the RKW Chair and I have no doubt he will do the same as the Treasurer. As long as Cody can take care of the IRKA checkbook as he does managing his rhinos at The Wilds, we are in good hands. It has been my utmost pleasure serving you all as the IRKA President for the past 6 years. I won't be going anywhere though. There is too much to learn and too much to share about rhino management and conservation. I hope to see you all soon! The RKW 2025 can't come soon enough!

**Joe Hauser**

## **By-law changes and election updates**

**IRKA sent out a voting ballot in May with potential changes to our by-laws. The majority vote was to increase our Board of Directors to 13 members in a reflection of the additional programs and committees the association has grown to support.**

**With 5 seats open in the 2023 election we would encourage all members to vote!**

### **Nominations close on June 30th.**

Nominations can be made in accordance with the bylaws, Article VI Sec. 5:

- Any professional member in good standing may submit nominations for another professional member in good standing.
- Nominations received must be accompanied by the written endorsement of at least one professional member in good standing, who must not work at the same institution as that of the nominee.
- + No more than two members of the Board may be from the same institution.
- Professional members must be willing to abide by the bylaws, meet the criteria in Article VIII, and support the code of ethics governing the organization.

**All professional members in good standing as of July 15th are eligible to vote. Voting will be held between July 28th and August 11th online.**

### **Elected members to the IRKA Board of Directors will have the following responsibilities:**

- Be willing to abide by the IRKA by-laws, meet criteria in Article VIII and support the code of ethics which govern the organization
- Be actively involved in all BOD discussions (electronic and annual meeting)
- Participate in biennial Rhino Keeper Workshop and assist hosting institution and/or its members, when needed, to ensure timely completion of tasks
- Be willing to share their knowledge and expertise with the membership through a variety of venues
- Attend annual BOD meeting at own or institution expense (free registration will be provided during RKW years)
- Be accountable to the BOD for any commitments made to IRKA
- Expected to volunteer as chairperson or participate in a number of committees
- Assist chairperson in developing a plan, securing BOD approval and ensuring the committee reaches its goals

**New terms begin September 1st, 2023 and will serve for 3 years.**

## **Facility Focus on Audubon Zoo's Southern White Rhinoceros Program**



At Audubon Zoo in New Orleans, Louisiana, we presently hold a crash of 1.2 Southern white rhinoceros comprising Saba, Yvonne, and Bonnie. Within our holding and exhibit space we can provide a fairly dynamic habitat from both a rhinoceros and guest perspective. Being a relatively new team, we are presently working on reestablishing old behaviors and using those as a foundation for new ones.



**Audubon Nature Institute**

We established our present crash in 2014 with the arrival of Bonnie and are presently running them in two separate groups sharing an approximately  $\frac{3}{4}$  acre habitat with a pair of Eastern white-bearded wildebeest bulls. Historically they have also shared space with a pair of plains zebra mares before their passing in 2021. Saba our bull was born in 1991 and Yvonne is our older female, born in 1990. Both arrived at Audubon Zoo in 1993 to begin our present crash, as well as producing our only calf Nane (aka Satchmo) in 2003 before he was transferred out in 2006. Bonnie was born in 1998 and joined us in 2014. Before Bonnie's arrival, we had an additional older female, Macite, born in the wild and coming to live at Audubon in 1999 until her passing in 2016. At present, we are running our crash in single-gender groups due aggression between Saba and Yvonne, though we have not ruled out intros between Saba and Bonnie, or possibly reevaluating Saba and Yvonne's relationship in the future.

Our indoor holding space consists of a five-stall rhino barn with an approximately 1,500 square foot holding yard. Two of our stalls are set up to hold a calf should we decide to breed again in the future. The stall leading out into the holding yard has a padded floor, with the remaining four being concrete. All gates are manually operated with a short chute leading out into the exhibit. Our exhibit space consists of an approximately  $\frac{3}{4}$  acre yard with two wallows (one maintained by keeper staff adjacent to the guest overlook, the other having been dug and maintained by the rhinos), a lagoon, shade tree enclosed in a corral, and an encircling ring of bollards that allows for perimeter management.



With regards to behavioral management, we are working to modify old behaviors to allow for more choice and control on the part of our charges. Presently, we are focusing our efforts on blood draws, open mouths, and rectal desensitization to build towards blood, dental, and reproductive work. We face the traditional challenge inherent in working with white rhinos: disinterest in both enrichment and novel food items. Ways we are working around that problem include incorporating more novel environmental enrichment, such as adding different types of soils and substrates to the yard and adding and moving large deadfall pieces to allow "new" rub spots.

Going into the future, we are hoping to expand our program in many ways such as reconfiguring the layout of the chute system, adding exhibit access points for keepers, and implementing more seasonal environmental enrichment. Recent major changes to the yard include the removal of an enormous oak tree that had previously taken up an enormous footprint in the yard and effectively blocked half the exhibit from view, and clearing out underbrush and lower hanging tree branches to allow the animals to access more shaded areas while not impacting guest visibility. Our team is quite excited about the direction our program is heading, and can't wait to see what the future holds.



**Chris St. Romain**  
Audubon Nature Institute

IT IS BETTER TO GIVE THAN TO RECEIVE

## 2023 R.K.W. Silent Auction success!



**Another successful RKW is in the books and it was a fantastic one!**

The fundraising committee would like to send out a huge thank you to all of the delegates who participated in the silent auction and raffle.

Due to your huge hearts (and desire to have cool rhino stuff!) we were able to raise **\$7,300.00!!!**

The funds raised at the rhino keeper workshop goes back into the IRKA's scholarship fund. This means we are able to support our members who might need some funding for transportation, registration or accommodations for the workshops. For more information be sure to check out the IRKA website: [www.rhinokeeperassociation.org](http://www.rhinokeeperassociation.org).

We had a lot of amazing items donated to us for this event and we wanted to thank all of the people who donated an item (or 2) to our fundraiser. We also wanted to include the IRKA members who were not able to attend the workshop and encourage everyone to check out the websites / ETSY artists who stepped up to help us out. This list may also help anyone who was out bid or did not win in the raffle, acquire an item directly from the vendor.

If there was an item that you wanted, but did not see a website / description please reach out to [Christine rhinoqueen64@gmail.com](mailto:Christine.rhinoqueen64@gmail.com) or [Angie iheartrhinos@gmail.com](mailto:Angie.iheartrhinos@gmail.com) and they can connect you!



### ETSY vendors who contributed:

- "Rhinos make me happy" t-shirt by Pink Pepper
- Tiny silver rhino ring by Tankard
- Rhino tie by Fredrick Thomas
- Felted Rhino hat by Wool Yoo
- "Rhino is my spirit animal" sweatshirt by Sacred Symbol Shirts
- Silver rhino ring (engraved black rhino) by AFox Jewelry Studio
- Rhino coin necklace by Finds and Farthings
- Small lamp with rhino lampshade by The Bohemian Lark
- Rhino wall sconce by Uncle Lucas Studio
- Stacked rhino wooden artwork by Downsized Designs

### Companies who contributed:

- Leather rhino ottoman by Reiner's Originals [www.reiners.ca](http://www.reiners.ca)
- Whisky glasses with pewter rhino embellishment by Mbare [www.mbare.com](http://www.mbare.com)
- Limited edition Rhino Collection jewelry by Mulberry Mongoose [www.mulberrymongoose.com](http://www.mulberrymongoose.com)
- Cotopaxi backpack by The Fenway Group Promotions [www.fenwaygroup.com](http://www.fenwaygroup.com)
- Watercolour painting by Leslie MacNeil [www.lesliemacneil.ca](http://www.lesliemacneil.ca)
- Rhino string art by Blissful Days Designs [www.blissfuldaysdesigns.com](http://www.blissfuldaysdesigns.com)
- Rhino glass artwork sculpture by Sheryl Lambert
- Quotentials Fused Glass - Facebook
- Rhinory merchandise by The Rhinory [www.rhinory.com](http://www.rhinory.com)

### Keepers/ Rhino Supporters who contributed

*but do not have a website (please reach out to Chris or Angie for email information):*

- Wooden geometric rhino artwork by Erica Jacques – Toronto Zoo
- Rhino fabric dog collar and leash by Amy Gerditschke – Toronto Zoo
  - Embroidered rhino pillow by Steph Beatson – Toronto Zoo
  - "Rhino on Fire" original oil painting by Brad Millward
- Northern white rhino artwork on tote bags by Bettina Hayes
  - Rhino string art by Sally Johnston
- Rhino artwork sculpture "Have Hope" and "Life finds a way" by Chad Harmon
  - Rhino charcuterie board by Jessye Wojtusik – Omaha Zoo
  - Rocket Cat t-shirts by Todd Schwenk – Detroit Zoo
- Handmade rhino wreath by Cheryl Chintella – Cleveland Metroparks Zoo
- Embroidered (Lion, Elephant, Giraffe) sweatshirts by Katherine Heffernan
- Crochet rhino scarf and rhino print blanket by Tina Fess – Seneca Park Zoo
  - Black rhino tote bag by Kori Odum – Disney's Animal Kingdom

Thanks also go out to all of you who brought items with you to the workshop for the auction and raffle – we could not have done it without all of you!! Bravo!!

Also, a huge thank you for giving us item descriptions well in advance of the workshop. It saved us a tremendous amount of time in making bid sheets before we arrived at Salt Fork. Chris and Angie actually enjoyed Zoo Day for the first time!!!

Another round of thanks goes out to our wonderful BOD members who willingly stayed around to help set up in advance of our banquet night. You all are amazing and we could not have done this without your help!



Keep your eyes peeled for announcements coming up for the World Rhino Day fundraiser. We are very happy to have Kori Odum, Amber Berndt and Janel Jankowski join the fundraising team! Kori was invaluable in helping this past WRD when she volunteered to assist in the Buff fundraiser.

**Welcome ladies and let's get busy fundraising!!**

## AIRS Update

The American Institute of Rhinoceros Science (AIRS) project has been in full swing for the past year, and it has been a labor of love for everyone involved. As we make the final push toward data and sample collection, we wanted to share some updates. For some background, the AIRS project started from the desire to understand our rhinos in managed care better. Several areas of interest had already been identified by the Rhino Research Council during Rhino TAG sessions in 2019. They include Physical Fitness, Wellbeing, Reproduction, and Iron Overload which we have dubbed the 'Pillars' of the AIRS project – each led by a team of experts in that area. We also know that nothing happens in a vacuum, so any questions, samples, and other data that we would request from the diverse facilities that manage rhinos would be intertwined. We understand that each facility is unique in its management styles and strategies and wanted to understand how that impacts rhino physiology. Ultimately, we want to produce science-based, affordable, and feasible management recommendations.



The next step was to ask any rhino holding facility in North America to participate. And **WOW** has the response been amazing. The kind of data we are collecting ranges from physical measurements of animals to behavior observations and novel object tests to monthly blood samples for one year (and even more if participating in reproductive monitoring) not to mention a comprehensive husbandry and temperament survey. Many of these also needed to be collected by an AIRS member – which means facilities not only need to train (likely) new behaviors but also prepare to have a new person involved.

Although we are still collecting data/samples, we can start to see the finish line for this phase of the project – and it is both overwhelming and humbling to see the amount of data we will have to analyze, completely thanks to the incredible efforts made by the rhino caretakers. So far, we have over 190 rhinos from over 60 institutions participating in AIRS. The Physical Fitness Pillar has either fully or partially validated 7 biomarkers in serum that will help us understand rhino metabolic health, collected measurements and heart rate data, and collected deuterated water samples from 34 rhinos. The Wellbeing Pillar has over 65 novel object tests and over 615 hours of behavioral observations. The Reproduction Pillar has hormone monitoring samples from 25 females so far, representing over 700 fecal samples and 125 serum samples. Iron Overload Pillar has analyzed mineral content from 22 rhinos and has been able to distinguish between species and sex using horn DNA. We are expecting even more samples - facilities have been joining over the past 15 months, so some have completed their AIRS participation while others still have a few to several months/activities to go.

**As the samples come in and we start to generate data we will be able to compile an incredibly comprehensive dataset that could inform the way we manage rhinos.**

**It will also undoubtedly lead to new questions.**



**Parker Pennington**  
Cincinnati Zoo

## IRKA Merchandise



Do you want to support  
IRKA?

Need a new hat?  
A decal on your water bottle?  
Enjoy bigfoot conservation?

Check out the new merchandise  
available in limited quantities at our  
website

[rhinokeeperassociation.org](http://rhinokeeperassociation.org)



## Volunteer Committee Update

The volunteer committee would like to thank all the amazing volunteers who have come forward to get involved and helped the IRKA since the committee's inception. Thanks to their help, we are making strides in improving social media experiences and keeping the website relevant with the latest information and content. We are also continuing our volunteer partnership with the International Rhino Foundation, providing research on special projects.

**The volunteer committee met in early June and identified a number of projects and ideas that could be implemented moving forward. Two of those projects we would like to concentrate on now are conservation messaging, and creating a keeper encounter encyclopedia.**

Keeper encounters have become one of the most effective tools for connecting and educating zoo visitors. For the majority, it has been woven into our daily routine. Every keeper has their own unique delivery and content they rely on entering any encounter. The checklist of concrete facts and talking points, anecdotal personal experiences, and the fun facts that make people love rhinos! The IRKA would like to capitalize on the vast knowledge and individuality of our membership to create a comprehensive collection of experiences, talking points and fun facts. We feel that once complete, this information could be a valuable resource for all keepers to enhance their ability to connect with people at every encounter.

Proper conservation messaging is vital to the survival of all five species of rhino. It is the IRKA's duty to ensure we are able to provide members the most accurate, beneficial and up to date information to date. We believe it is valuable to have access to the information available to speak on the conservation efforts going on for all five species. It is our goal to have volunteers research and compile the latest information on conservation efforts going on for both African and Asian rhinos.



Anyone interested in volunteering to research, compile and organize the information for either of these projects for the IRKA should contact:

Jason Faessler at [jfaessler@nashvillezoo.org](mailto:jfaessler@nashvillezoo.org) or Jade Tuttle at [jade.tuttle@nczoo.org](mailto:jade.tuttle@nczoo.org).

We can always use content for our social media sites, anyone interested in helping out that way can contact Pat Fountain at [pfountain@ingham.org](mailto:pfountain@ingham.org).

### Rhino Research Review:

## *Effects of age, seasonality, and reproductive status on the gut microbiome of Southern White Rhinoceros (*Ceratotherium simum simum*) at the North Carolina Zoo*

In this [article](#), published in *Animal Microbiome*, Burnham *et al.* compared the gut microbiomes 8 female southern white rhinos (SWR) housed at North Carolina Zoo. The term “microbiome” refers to the collection of microorganisms (bacteria, viruses and fungi) within a particular environment. In this paper, the authors collected fecal samples, then amplified and analyzed bacterial DNA within the samples to determine what types of bacteria live within SWR digestive tracts. Recently, the study of gut microbiomes (and others such as the skin microbiome) has received a great deal of attention as microbes are important contributors to nearly all biological functions of the organism in which they reside.

This paper is not the first to examine gut microbiomes in a rhinoceros species but is nonetheless important as it expands significantly upon what was previously described and uncovers opportunities for future research. Most notably, Burnham *et al.*, showed that even in a relatively controlled study (i.e., the animals sampled were all females, living in the same location, fed the similar diets, etc.) individual variation in gut microbiomes is high. In this study, the age of the animal and the month the fecal samples were collected both correlated with differences in the types and number of bacteria present. The authors propose that age-related variation may be due to dietary differences, such as transitioning from nursing to consuming a more diverse diet, and/or related to the different hormonal states of the females studied.

One of the challenges in conducting studies like this, in a species like a rhino, is that researchers typically have enough individuals to discover differences between them, but not enough individuals to determine if those differences are statistically significant. In this study, the authors have a relatively large sample size of 8 individuals, yet are still limited in the conclusions they can draw from their data. Nevertheless, when comparing the reproductive statuses of individual females and the types of bacteria present, they noted that bacteria associated with poor reproductive performance in other species were more abundant in non-reproductive female SWR. This observation is a particularly interesting finding and further studies looking at SWR fertility and the abundance of these bacterial types is certainly warranted.

Burnham CM, McKenney EA, van Heugten KA, Minter LJ, Trivedi S. Effects of age, seasonality, and reproductive status on the gut microbiome of Southern White Rhinoceros (*Ceratotherium simum simum*) at the North Carolina Zoo. *Anim Microbiome*. 2023 May 5;5(1):27. doi: 10.1186/s42523-023-00249-5. PMID: 37147724; PMCID: PMC10163733.

### Correspondences

#### Births:

Safari West ----- Male SWR "Otto"  
Taronga Western Plains Zoo ----- Male southern black and Male SWR

#### Deaths:

Sedgwick County Zoo ----- Female eastern black "Bibi"  
Disney's Animal Kingdom ----- Male SWR "Dugan"  
BREC's Baton Rouge Zoo ----- Female eastern black "Gemstone"  
Brookfield Zoo ----- Male eastern black "Nakili"  
Omaha's Henry Doorly Zoo ----- Male GOH "Jontu"  
Tulsa Zoo ----- Female SWR "Jeannie"

#### Transfers:



Disney's Animal Kingdom ----- Male eastern black "Komati" from Great Plains Zoo  
Berlin Zoo opened new habitat ----- Male GOH "Inesh" from West Midland Safari Park  
GOH are a new species for the zoo.

### New Members

- Jocely Katzakian ----- Sacramento Zoo
- Cycy Leturgeon ----- CERZA parc de safari
- Marloes Vijge ----- Gaia Zoo
- Rachel Cartwright ----- Chester Zoo
- Michelle Johnson ----- Montgomery Zoo
- Rebecca Woolley ----- Lincoln Park Zoo
- Michaela Palma ----- Denver Zoo



**Conservation Partners** are conservation organization or zoological institution which supports rhino conservation in accordance with the objectives and purpose of the IRKA. These partnerships often provide discounts for the supporting institution . It is important that as the IRKA grows we continue to garner the support from all facilities that are responsible for the protection and management of rhinoceros. We would like to extend our appreciation for the support from the following institutions, and hopefully we can add your zoo to this growing list! If you or your institution are interested in becoming a Conservation Partner, please visit:

[Support IRKA](#)

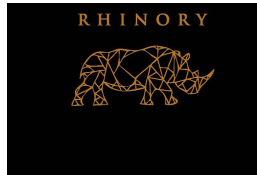
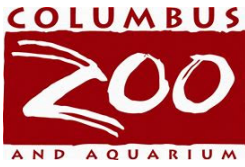
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### 2023 Conservation Partners



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