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RIVERBANKS ZOO AND GARDEN

2012 zoo attendance breaks record

By JOEY HOLLEMAN - jholleman@thestate.com

Riverbanks Zoo and Garden broke its all-time attendance record, soaring past 1 million visitors in the 12 months that ended June 30.

Million-visitor years used to be unusual at Riverbanks. The previous record of 1,020,876 in 2002 was powered by the opening of blockbuster exhibits – the new Birdhouse, Ndoki Forest and Koala Knockabout. If you use the calendar year ending Dec. 31, Riverbanks barely broke 1 million in 1990 after the opening of the Aquarium-Reptile Complex. Those were the only million-plus years before 2008.

But even as the economy slumped, Riverbanks has hit the 1 million mark each of the past three fiscal years. The 1,029,492 visitors in the year ending June 30 finally topped the 2002 mark.

Riverbanks Zoo has had a third year of more than one million visitors in 2012. The birth of a few new animals and the opening of the newest attraction at Riverbanks Zoo, Sky High Safari, pictured above, are few of the other highlights for the zoo in this year.
- File photographs /The State

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Zoo attendance
Riverbanks Zoo has passed 1 million in attendance in only four fiscal years, including the past three. Here are the top four attendance marks.

"This trend is remarkable, considering we have not had any major new exhibits in the last 10 years," said executive director Satch Krantz.

Tourism in general has been slightly down across the state in the past three years, though it has rebounded somewhat in the past year. Accommodations taxes are up 6 percent statewide in the past 12 months, including a jump of a little under 3 percent in Richland and Lexington counties, according to state tax records.

Rich Harrill, acting director of the USC School of Hotel, Restaurant and Tourism Management, praised Riverbanks for investing in marketing. "Just ride around the Midlands and you'll see (the billboards)," Harrill said. "It's what we preach and preach and preach. They say 'Build it and they will come.' Well, they're not going to come if you don't market it."

Harrill also credited Riverbanks for being strategic with promotions, such as using Brew at the Zoo to draw in young adults who aren't typically zoo-goers.

Krantz credits a number of factors, not the least of which is the quality experience visitors get when they come to Riverbanks. The soft economy and high gas prices also forced many in the region to cut back on high-end vacations and look for something closer to home. A day at the zoo filled the void.

Riverbanks also added a popular ropes course, brought in Komodo dragons and bald eagles and got plenty of attention with the births of a

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1,029,492 in 2012 1,020,876 in 2002 1,015,201 in 2010 1,000,224 in 2011

koala, two Toco toucans, two giraffes and five Galapagos tortoises.

"Not any one of those alone would result in this increase (in attendance), but you put them all together and it adds up," Krantz said.

The numbers are particularly impressive considering the size of the Columbia market. Riverbanks ranks fourth among zoos in North America based on market penetration (determined by annual attendance divided by metropolitan population). Riverbanks trails Canada's Granby Zoo in Quebec, Henry Doorly Zoo in Omaha and San Diego Zoo's Safari Park.

Riverbanks could handle even more visitors. The zoo parking lot is packed only about six weeks per year, generally in April and May, Krantz said.

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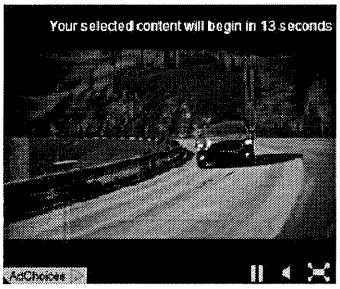

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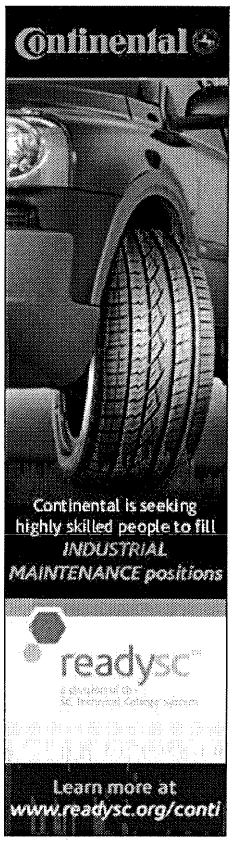

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