



*We Bought a*

**ZOO!**





# (And it's Pretty *WILD*)

**WORDS** MICHELLE MEEHAN - Features Writer

When you look through the average person's photo collection, you'll come across the usual assortment of family holidays and special occasions. What you don't often see are kids leaping over alligators or hand-feeding lions.

But when your Dad owns a zoo, and your childhood is spent surrounded by a collection of native and exotic animals, it's not surprising that these are the types of memories you create.

Set in the picturesque bushland surrounds of Nulkaba, **Hunter Valley Zoo** has been home to Jason Pearson and his family for the past 12 years.

Originally established by long-time resident Beresford Smith in the early 1990s and named Rusa Park Zoo, Jason took over the 10-acre property in 2006 when its owner at the time was struggling to make ends meet.

Since then he has been working to revamp, renovate and extend the facility, with new infrastructure and a growing population of animals that are second to none for a zoo of this size.

His children Abbey and Kane have grown up as the zoo has, with a hands-on involvement that makes the passionate conservationist proud.

"I've got two kids, a daughter who's 13 and a son who's nine, and to see them grow up and give them so many life skills that they wouldn't otherwise get... I'm quite proud of those sorts of moments," Jason said.

"The kids are passionate, especially my daughter because she's going to head down the veterinary science path. My son is a typical boy at nine-years-old with a short attention span, but he gets involved in all the hand-raising and the bottle-rearing.

"And coming up soon it'll be our alligator nest raiding season, and they'll be involved in that as well, taking alligator eggs out of nests.

"I think deep down it's probably another 10 or 15 years away before they'll look back and appreciate what they got to do and experience.

"I remember when we first got our lions, Christmas Day we hand-fed lions through the mesh, and we walked around the zoo, and I took a photo of it. I think the significance of that will be a lot bigger when they're 25 or 30 or sitting down with their own kids and saying, 'Look what I got to do when I was young.' That does make you proud."

What also makes Jason proud are the changes that have taken place since he took over what he described as "a basic backyard collection of animals".

Along the way, he has created a true destination for the Hunter Valley, with around 130 species of birds, mammals, primates and reptiles on display including both white and tawny African lions, cheetahs, meerkats, ostriches, alligators and Tasmanian devils.

The zoo is also home to some incredibly rare animals including a couple of red-handed tamarins, which are one of only two pairs in Australia.

Jason said he has aimed to create a hands-on experience with a focus on conservation and education, although it's been a long, hard road to creating the successful and flourishing operation of today.

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"Saying it was a challenge is definitely an understatement. It's probably been the toughest thing I've ever done in my life, and for the first five years I took on extra work to make ends meet," he said.

"It was a basic backyard collection, really. There were a few types of monkeys; there was one koala and a lot of Australian natives.

"We changed tack because a lot of our visitation is local, and the locals want to see something with a point of difference, which is where the exotic angle came in, where we beefed up the number of

primates that we have and started to choose other species that are not something you'll see in many other places.

"We also took species that sometimes need a bit of help in the sense that they might not exhibit that well or are challenging to feed so not many zoos take them on. Like our maned wolf and our Malayan tapir, which unfortunately we recently had to put down. He was the last male left in Australia.

"So, there are a few really cool species like that, that had their challenges to keep, but we brought them in and displayed them in a way so that people can see them and appreciate them.

"We've gone from what it was when we started, which was just a native collection, into what we pride ourselves on now, which is a mixture of conservation and education to the public in a format where people can be as hands-on as possible in today's challenging environment.

"That's my goal, to have a really hands-on style of a park, because the majority of kids now aren't out looking around at animals like I was when I was a kid, they're looking at them through a computer screen.

"If we can provide the environment where they can touch them, smell them, and hear them, that's going to help create the next generation of conservationists."

Conservation is a major motivation for Jason, which makes the most recent breeding season at the zoo such an important one.

"We imported some red-handed tamarins, they're a small monkey, and they have just recently had twins, only two days ago. The significance for them is that there are only two pairs of them in Australia," he said.

"We hope to have a couple of pairs here eventually, and import some more, some different genetics, so we can breed them and help get that species established in Australia, which is a really great thing to be a part of.

"We've had our biggest (baby) boom ever. We're sitting now at 15 baby monkeys born here in the last eight weeks. We've had triplet marmosets, we've had twin ring-tailed lemurs, and our spider ►



## Everyone's Lining up to visit Hunter Valley Zoo!

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monkeys have also bred. Spider monkeys have never been bred here at the zoo in its whole history, and there's only two other facilities in Australia that have also bred spider monkeys, so some really fantastic achievements have been made at the zoo in the last 12 months.

"Conservation is really important; it's what drives us.

"Educating people is also extremely important because I think the more people that are educated, the more we'll do for the environment, because as a species human beings are just taking over at a rate of knots, but if we were a little more informed and educated on what we can do, every little bit helps.

"Now that we're no longer living on the seat of our pants in the sense of working other jobs as well as here, conservation's the next big challenge that we're going to start focusing on even more."

The first step towards that goal has been for the zoo to secure the property at the rear of the existing site, which gives them another 42 acres to expand into.

Jason said they have a number of exciting plans for the land, including extending the conservation program and adding to their exciting, exotic animal exhibits.

**“ We plan to go down the African Savannah path, with giraffes and zebra and that sort of species, which is really exciting,” he said.**

"But what I'm more excited about is it'll give us some room to do some really good conservation-based projects, breeding and releasing some particular species of Australian natives that we're still working on."

For now, Jason is just looking forward to the busy summer season ahead, and the influx of visitors that flock to the zoo over the Christmas and school holiday period.

Hunter Valley Zoo is open every day during the school holidays (excluding Christmas Day), from 9am to 4pm.

There are a range of educational keeper talks each day showcasing everything from the zoo's lions and cheetahs to the Capuchin monkeys, wombats and meerkats, while the zoo's interactive yards allow you to pat and feed some of their collection of farmyard goats, sheep, deer, kangaroos and wallabies.

Visitors who want an even more hands-on experience can also book one of the meerkat, emperor tamarin or marmoset encounters, which provide a 20-minute experience inside the exhibit feeding and interacting with the animals.

For more information about Hunter Valley Zoo visit [www.huntervalleyzoo.com.au](http://www.huntervalleyzoo.com.au) ■

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