by Willow Soltow

"Can you make it over that log?"
"Watch out!"
"Hold on to your shell, turtle, here comes the obstacle course!"

Is it a footrace? a fifty-yard dash? No, it's a Turtle Trot! Only—the participants aren't real turtles. They're youngsters visiting the Staten Island Zoo for its special Zoo Olympics day. Each year for the past five years, the Staten Island Zoo has designated one Saturday as Zoo Olympics day. A number of activities are planned to give youngsters and their families a chance to "think like the animals." Children have the opportunity to travel a mock turtle obstacle course while wearing a cardboard turtle "shell," build their own human-sized bird nest, or use their sense of smell to identify foods the way an animal might do.

"The idea for our first Zoo Olympics originated when we were looking for some special way to celebrate the 1980 International Olympics," explains Staten Island Zoo Director of Education Susan R. Long. "It was such a success that we've repeated a similar event every year since. Our Zoo Olympics have been so rewarding for us," observes Susan, "that we were eager to share the idea with others. A Zoo Olympics might be just the thing for a teacher or humane society looking for new ways to celebrate Be Kind to Animals Week, for instance."

Each year, Susan and her colleagues plan their Zoo Olympics around activities that visitors can do largely on their own. With a limited number of volunteer helpers and staff members available, a self-guiding aspect to the events is required. To accomplish this, they use large posters for each event that include an eye-catching illustration, easy-to-follow instructions, and an explanation of how the activity is related to the behavior of real animals. For most events, they have one coach/interpreter to encourage participants and provide explanations of the meaning behind each animal activity.

Building a bird nest is lots of work—but it's also lots of fun, as these youngsters will attest. Using human-sized nesting materials helps children understand just how much work is involved for a bird in building a nest.
Five “events” are chosen each year, with some being revised from previous years. “We’ve always planned a variety of activities,” explains Susan. “Some are physically active. Others are sensory, sensory activities. All activities are designed to provide an insight into animal needs and behavior, to be noncompetitive, to appeal to all ages, and to be fun,” she adds.

A Day for Families

“The kids and their parents really enjoy the events,” observes Susan. The youngsters invariably repeat the activities as many times as they can. Usually, a family will visit and participate in each activity once, then they go around and try nearly everything again, sometimes repeating their favorites over and over.

In some cases, adults participate along with their children, providing added encouragement to youngsters. Even the parents who don’t try the activities themselves show a high degree of interest and actively coach their children. “This is very satisfying to us,” comments Susan, “because it gets adults out of the passive stand-back-with-arms-folded mode of behavior so typical of many family outings.” By contrast, the Zoo Olympics provide an informal learning situation that families can share and discuss.

To reinforce the learning aspect and provide a souvenir of the experience, handouts are prepared containing supplemental information for children and their parents to take home and talk about. As an additional souvenir of the day’s activities, the zoo also provides attractive stickers.

Fun, Facts, and Recreation

This past year’s Zoo Olympics featured activities based on the theme native animals. The zoo staff chose this theme in response to a need that it perceived on the part of many zoo visitors to learn more about animals encountered in their own suburban neighborhoods in and around Staten Island. Susan explains, “Our goals in designing the program were to promote awareness of wildlife, wild animal behavior, habitats, and survival needs, as well as to encourage positive attitudes that support decisions and actions beneficial to animals.”

In order to achieve these goals, the following five events included in this year’s program focused on the kinds of animals that suburban children might see any day or night.

Bird Nest Build is an opportunity for children to enjoy “being” a bird and building a nest. After choosing partners, the children built their human-sized nests out of human-sized materials. “Having the children work with materials on a human scale allowed for greater appreciation of what a bird really accomplishes in nest building,” explains Susan. She goes on to add, “We scavenged at local shops and businesses for packing materials—long cardboard tubes; sheets of one-half inch Styrofoam; long, wide strips of ribbon. We chose nothing smaller than three-quarter inch foot square. The emphasis was on how much work it is for a bird to make so many trips to collect nesting materials, rather than on a competition for the ‘best’ or ‘neatest’ nest.”

For the Possum Picnic, different, familiar items with strong, recognizable odors were put into containers for youngsters to smell, rather than see, in order to identify. The smelly items included orange rinds, coffee grounds, and banana peels. Some were placed in plastic garbage bags and battered trash cans, providing a further lesson on who hungry wild animals and -free-roaming pets upset garbage containers that have not been secured. Susan and zoo staff members found a ready source of fresh fruit garbage at the local market. A school cafeteria or nearby church group might prove a useful source for fresh coffee grounds, she suggests.

For the Frog Leap, a circle about six feet in diameter was drawn on pavement outdoors. Several concentric half-circles, or arcs, were drawn outside the center ring. The center represented the frog pond. Children were allowed to choose whatever distance they wanted to be from the center circle and then see how many jumps, or “frog leaps,” it took to reach the safety of the pond. “In the past,” Susan explains, “we used a premeasured and had children record their best and longest frog leaps. This year, we tried something different—the frog pond with its concentric half-circles. We found it less competitive, and the kids seemed to enjoy it more. It was also more effective in conveying the real concerns of a frog in escaping predators.”

The Turtle Trot represented the most preparation as far as materials were concerned. Different-sized cardboard boxes were obtained, and the flaps on the open end cut off. The boxes were turned upside down and the neck hole was cut in each. Then the boxes were painted green. Students were directed to pick a “turtle” shell their own size and, while wearing it, travel on hands and knees over a log, through a forest made of traffic cones topped with pine branches, and under a rippling “pond” parachute. Students “swam” under the parachute held rippling two to three feet off the ground by volunteers and parents. “This was probably our most popular event,” observes Susan. “As soon as youngsters finished this one, they were right back at the starting line to try it again.”

The Raccoon Dabble provided a surprisingly challenging activity in which children and adults enjoyed identifying objects by touch alone. Yet, unlike the related “sensory box” activity in which children cannot see what they are putting their hands into, the Raccoon Dabble is easy to see and nonthreatening. Each participant receives a dishpan of Styrofoam “peanuts” in which five real peanuts are also included. With eyes closed, participants feel for the real ones. “In this activity, the children surpassed the adults in searching for retrieving the peanuts,” says Susan. She suggests that teachers adapting this activity for their own needs use deep dishes in the Styrofoam pieces will not blow away in a heavy wind. A receptacle for real peanut shells is also helpful. “You might ask friends, stores, or businesses for your unwanted Styrofoam packing material,” Susan adds.

An Answer to Spring Fever

As spring rolls around, many schools and youth groups plan field day events to encourage physical fitness and provide a refreshment break from the day-to-day routine. Blending recreation with education can produce a useful teaching tool—particularly during these months when students are eager to be up and outdoors. In addition, humane societies are always on the lookout for interesting, new activities for their summer camps and open house events. The above activities, when combined with educator guidance, can be used to stimulate further thinking, reading, and the study of animals—or just to have fun. You might want to plan your own Animal Olympics and use class discussion and research projects to enhance the learning aspect of this recreational event.

Although Susan describes her program as “labor-intensive” with respect to the planning and preparation stages, the actual events themselves are easy, fun, and rewarding for participants and coaches alike.

If you are thinking of planning your own Animal Olympics, Susan makes the following suggestions:

1. Start planning specific events well in advance. “It’s important to allow plenty of time to organize helpers and materials,” she advises.

2. Plan both active (physical) and quiet (sensory) activities to accommodate a range of abilities and to provide variation between motor skills and mental concentration.

3. If you choose to design your own activities, be sure to include ones that relate to specific concepts about animals and that also have meaning for the human participants. Concepts relating to animal senses and abilities seem to be better grasped by youngsters than, say, general animal facts.

4. Plan activities to fit the space you have to work with. “Don’t spread things out too far: anticipate how much room you’ll need for onlookers and participants waiting in line,” suggests Susan. Be sure to plan for inclement weather—a rain date or an indoor site are a must.

5. Keep your activities simple, fun, easy-to-understand, and noncompetitive to facilitate learning and appreciation. State instructions clearly and concisely. “We always test our instructions and the events themselves before it’s too late to make improvements,” Susan points out.

An Animal Olympics day combines outdoor recreation with fun learning experiences. You might want to adapt the activities outlined here to accommodate large numbers of participants for a field day event. Or try one or two activities with a smaller group of youngsters as a recess time treat. Whether you use the activities exactly as they were devised by Susan Long and the Staten Island Zoo or adapt these activities to your own needs, you’ll find that an Animal Olympics day will provide plenty of fun and learning for everyone involved.