

# Family Trip: Snow Leopard Days

Many families plan trips to the zoo during summertime, but they're missing out if they also don't schedule a visit in winter, says Rosamond Gifford Zoo director Ted Fox.

"Today, our eldest Asian elephant, Siri, was outside making snowballs and tossing them in the air," says Fox. "The red pandas and the river otters also love to play in snow."

Rosamond Gifford Zoo is set on 43 acres adjacent to Burnet Park in Syracuse. It is home to more than 700 animals, many of which are endangered species the zoo is working to preserve. The zoo is one of only 231 institutions accredited by the Association of Zoos & Aquariums, which ensures that a facility offers animals the best possible environment.

Each January and February, the zoo celebrates Snow Leopard Days as a way to introduce families to not only the two snow leopards — Senge and Daania — who live at the zoo, but also to the other animals who are well-equipped for cold weather.

"Many are native to snowy places. Red pandas are native to the Himalayas. Amur tigers hail from Siberia. Bison have heavy coats and actually prefer cold weather. Sichuan takin and Turkmenian markhor are wild mountain hoof stock that are used to high altitudes, and our Andean bears are native to the Andes Mountains in South America," says Fox. "You will see all of these animals out in winter."

Syracuse is the snowiest city of its size in the United States, so chances are, guests enjoying the zoo during Snow Leopard Days will see snow on the ground. "The sight of animals in the snow is very striking, and their behaviors are often different in cold weather," says Fox.

Other benefits to visiting Rosamond Gifford Zoo this time of year include smaller crowds that allow visitors to "really linger and feel like you experience each animal in a special way," says Fox. "You will also see many, many more waterfowl on our main pond, as our moving water attracts wild mallards and black ducks to winter in a habitat where they feel safe and can take advantage of free food."

Many of the zoo's waterfowl are going through their courtship displays, seeking mates for the spring nesting season, says Fox, "And that can be amazing to watch as well."

And of course, the stars of the winter show are the leopards — Senge, a 9-year-old female, and Daania, a male who will be 2 in June. "It is a time of year when you can see both of them on exhibit together," says Fox. "And as part of our daily enrichments, they get some special treats."

“One thing they really like are scents, so the keepers will rub a scent like fresh herbs, peppermint or perfume on areas of their exhibit — that’s what’s going on when you see the snow leopards rubbing up against rocks or logs.”

Snow leopards are native to the mountains of central Asia, from Russian and Mongolia through China and the Himalayas, says Fox. “Their unique coloration — white with black “rosettes” — helps them blend into snowy mountainsides.”

Populations of these beautiful cats have suffered from habitat destruction and hunting, Fox says. “There are believed to be fewer than 7,000 in the wild.”

Rosamond Gifford Zoo — which was named for a wealthy heiress whose foundation made an endowment in 1999 — is open 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. daily, except for Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year’s Day.

During snow Leopard days — Jan. 2 through Feb. 28 — reduced admission is in effect: Adults, \$5; youth, \$2, and \$2.50 for seniors. For more information, visit [www.rosamondgiffordzoo.org](http://www.rosamondgiffordzoo.org).

Winter’s a good time to visit, says Fox, because “You may even see an elephant making a snowball!”