

Revisiting Octagon, there are plenty of animals to enjoy

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By Suzanne Kee

Walking to our car in the parking lot at Octagon Wildlife Sanctuary, I lingered near the fence surrounding the large pond and smiled to see the familiar donkeys mingling with the ducks, geese and other birds enjoying the water on a brilliant Saturday in February.

What a relief I feel now that I have visited Octagon again after three years following the death of its director, Pete Caron. Lauri, his widow, has the place in tip-top shape and running so efficiently, it is impressive.

Entering the compound on Horseshoe Road (off State Road 31, southeast of Punta Gorda) I sniffed the clear air and felt as if I had stepped into someone's home. Someone's clean home. No dirty animal smells, no feathers stuck to fences, no lingering food waste in any cages, no feces lying anywhere. Just clean sand and earth floors in well-swept cages, plenty of shade for all the animals, private space for each one, places to hide, take naps, exercise, stretch and play. Every animal looks rested and peaceful, healthy and well-fed. There are plenty of animals to enjoy, and you can see them up close but still be protected by strong fencing that's easy to see through. I was delighted to discover energy- and water-saving efforts throughout the area. Every cage has "licking fountains" which the animals have quickly learned to use -- easy, water-saving devices that satisfy their thirst and save cleaning big bowls over and over using bleach and many volunteer hours. Every cage is immaculate. Birds, which tend to be messy and molt feathers, have volunteers who constantly clean house for them. There are lovely birds, including parrots, peacocks, multicolored roosters and a huge, all-white turkey, strutting his stuff.

The Octagon Wildlife Sanctuary is a rescue, rehabilitation, learning and conservancy for exotic animals, and here there are more than 200 animals, including tigers, lions, bears, leopards, cougars, wolves, foxes, primates and 'gators. Florida's injured and needy wildlife are rescued here, even animals from neighboring states.

Make a worthwhile trip, preferably with children, out to Octagon and see for yourself what happy, rescued animals enjoy. It will be a treat for you. And bring two more things: a sun hat and your checkbook. Octagon survives on dedicated volunteers and donations. Find a map and more information at www.octagonwildlife.org.