Maryland Zoo offers summer camp

Whether it’s monitoring the behavior of penguins, prairie dogs and chimps or getting a behind-the-scenes glimpse of food preparation for elephants, summer campers are in for hands-on learning at the Maryland Zoo in Baltimore.

Each year, the zoo offers the camp for children in grades three through nine as a way of raising awareness about the environment and educating youngsters about what it’s like to be a zookeeper.

Divided into age-appropriate sections, the camp will let children observe animals on exhibit and learn about animal care and husbandry. Like any camp, youngsters will enjoy songs, stories, arts, crafts and games. Older campers will complete research projects, and all participants will also give a special presentation to their families at the end of the camp.

“The kids are very passionate about it,” said Colline Pluot, who was a camp instructor last year. “We get to spend all day with them and we dig in depth into a lot of different topics. If the kids are interested in a certain topic, we have the flexibility to spend a whole day on it.”

Pluot said she was impressed last year to see children standing outside in 90-degree heat recording data about prairie dogs.

“They couldn’t get enough of it,” she remembered. “It was amazing how long they stood there and recorded how many times a prairie dog dashed across the exhibit. They really get into it.”

Campers will go on guided tours and will get to see “Sampson,” a baby elephant who is one of the most popular animals in a collection that encompasses 160 species and 1,200 animals. They will also be able to feed giraffes and meet some domestic animals one-on-one in the petting zoo.

Depending on scheduling, campers may also meet “Rise” and “Conquer,” two African ravens who serve as the official mascots of the Baltimore Ravens.
Kathryn Foat, the zoo’s vice president for education, said the camp helps young people understand how zoos operate. Some camp graduates go on to participate in the zoo’s “Junior Zoo Crew.”

“Children have a high passion for animals,” Foat said. “They want to know everything they can. The camp allows them to test that passion.”

Foat noted that campers get to visit the veterinary hospital and other operations that the general public rarely visits.

“They get to have more in-depth conversations with the zookeepers,” she said.

The program includes a conservation component, with children making crafts from recyclable materials and learning about how some animals in the wild may face extinction.

“When the kids come back with their families, they serve as the tour guides,” Foat said. “They become the experts.”

The camp runs weeklong sessions throughout the summer beginning June 22. The cost is $344 for zoo members and $408 for nonmembers. To register, visit www.marylandzoo.org.