

New York Trip Diary Volume 1

When my family travels, I like to take notes and make a diary of our activities. I figure it will be fun to read later when the kids are grown up and will also bring back many memories that might otherwise be forgotten. Now that I'm keeping a blog, I decided to just keep the trip diaries in my blog; that way I don't have to write them twice and they're automatically saved for us in cyberspace. Last weekend, my husband had to go to New York on business, so we decided to make it a family trip and take the kids along. Here is a log of our activities:

NEW YORK TRIP – MARCH 20-23, 2009 – TAYLOR: 9 yrs, SAMMIE: 4 yrs, DISNEY: 2½ yrs, CHRISTOPHER: 8 mos

Friday, March 20 – We left the house bright and early, only twenty minutes past our goal of 8 am. Disney and Christopher had kept us up until 2:30 in the morning the night before, so we were dragging a little, but they slept in so at least we could tie up loose ends without them. Sammie and Taylor were big helps in the morning! The kids were very good in the car even though Christopher got a little crabby toward the end of the first leg.

We arrived at the Cleveland Zoo 11ish – not my favorite zoo. I'm not one to complain about any zoo, but Cleveland had lots of walking to see a small amount of animals. I think part of the problem was that they were undergoing a lot of construction, so that made for more walking around the construction areas and also to some animals being off exhibit. They have koalas, but one was sick and the other was sleeping. I'm glad I got to see it anyway though since seeing koalas is a rare experience at zoos, but now I know why many zoos don't have them – they sleep 20 hours per day! Cleveland Zoo also has lots of steep hills, which was a "bear" (pun intended, wink wink) when pushing a double stroller, but luckily for me, that was my husband's problem. As we were

walking past the zoo's hospital, an employee told us to come inside because a baboon was about to have a physical. This is a really cool feature of this zoo – they have glass walls in their examination rooms so that zoo visitors can watch animals' procedures. Unfortunately, the baboon was not cooperative, and they couldn't get it sedated so we didn't get to see it. We waited for about an hour, but we really wanted to fit in Akron Zoo in the same day as well, so we decided not to wait any longer. Here are my girls waiting for the baboon's physical:



Cleveland Zoo also has a cool rainforest exhibit which normally costs extra admission, but our Toledo Zoo membership got us into ALL THREE zoos we visited on this trip for FREE!!! What a bargain AND an extra special Valentine's Day gift from my husband that keeps on giving! The rainforest exhibit had a cool 2-story monkey/squirrel exhibit, and a really nice view of a swimming gharial (a crocodillian with a long slender snout). But overall, the animal habitats were lacking. Thank goodness they are building new ones, but I wish they were building one for the giraffes. There were probably more than 10 giraffes confined to a tiny indoor room – at least it was only their winter quarters, so once it gets warm, they can go back outside and have room to roam. Hmm... maybe when I'm done with this trip diary, I'll have to develop a zoo rating system – that would be fun. Then I'd have an excuse to visit even more zoos, and re-visit some of

the old ones!



Here are the kids in front of the lion exhibit at Cleveland – then it was on to the Akron Zoo.

“Just Akron, cold beer, and poor poor thing for 2 weeks?” you ask? Well, not for two weeks, we were only there for about 2 hours, but I wanted to throw in that line from the stage play Harvey (and later, the movie starring James Stewart) that was running through my head for the two hours. Stay tuned for Akron!

Elephants Are Not Toys

I saw this article in the news a few weeks ago and was reminded why I will never take my kids to a circus:

INDIANAPOLIS – More than a dozen children were injured Saturday morning at the Indiana State Fairgrounds when a circus elephant they were waiting to ride got startled and caused some scaffolding to give way.

The scaffolding stairway leading people to the elephant ride collapsed just before 10 a.m. inside the Pepsi Coliseum where the Murat Shrine Circus is being held, said Indianapolis Fire Department spokeswoman Capt. Rita Reith.

At least 15 children between the ages of 8 and 12 years old were taken to first aid stations at the site, but most suffered only bumps and scrapes, Reith said. One adult suffered a minor arm injury when he or she fell from the top of the stairs.

It's unclear what caused the elephant to become startled.

The circus continued as scheduled.

Well, first things first – thank goodness no one was seriously hurt. And it's not that I'm some crazy animal rights activist. But I do believe in treating animals with respect. And I don't see how it's possible to treat circus elephants with respect given their busy show schedule, the cruel training methods, and the high intellect noteworthy of the elephant. Not only is the performance schedule strenuous, but the fact that such a huge animal is forced to travel from city to city *on a train* leaves no room for an argument that the animals are being treated with respect – in my opinion anyway. In fact, given the conditions that circus elephants are continually forced to endure, I'm actually surprised that circus catastrophes don't occur more often.

Zoos are another story; zoo animals' habitats try to mimic nature as closely as possible; they're not exploited for the sake of making a few bucks (pony rides and things like that are different – as I said, elephants are highly intelligent and when you add in the traveling with the circus and the sharp stick used to prod them when they disobey...), but rather, zoos exist to help educate the public. And if the general public is going to care enough about animals to want to help endangered species and to further conservation, zoos are a key factor in making this happen. So that brings me to the following picture, which was in an email I was sent. There is a zoo exhibit in Canada where you get to go in a pool adjacent to the polar bear exhibit; with only a pane of glass separating you from the polar bears (albeit a VERY thick pane

of glass!). It's a great example of how zoos can capture and hold people's attention about animals without harming the animal in the process. Check it out – maybe I can see it live some day!



Another Wonderful Zoo Visit

We went to the Toledo Zoo again last weekend (it was our second weekend to visit the zoo in a row; we visited on Feb 7 and 15). Almost a week has passed since our last visit, but I had other blog posts lined up and ready to go, so that's why I'm first writing about it now.

Having a zoo membership is awesome because you get to visit the zoo whenever you have free time, and you don't have to worry about seeing EVERYTHING on EVERY visit since you know you'll be back soon. The last few times we've gone, we parked in the back parking lot and stay on that side of the zoo, which cuts the amount of walking considerably – a great option for winter months since this parking lot is free in the off-season and very close to the rear zoo entrance. With 4 small children, this is the way that works best for us, even though it means skipping the other side of the zoo which includes the

polar bears, seals, wolves, and giraffes. No matter, we still see plenty, and now we have a whole half a zoo to see sometime if we go without the kids or are feeling extra ambitious.

Every zoo visit is different, which is one of the things I love about going. The animals are always doing different things, and my favorite exhibits vary with each visit. Here are the highlights from last Sunday's visit:

Lions – The Toledo Zoo has white lions. White lions are rare and the result of a recessive gene similar to the gene of white tigers. The Toledo Zoo has 3 white lion brothers on loan from Siegfried and Roy, the famous Las Vegas magicians. Normally during our zoo visits, the lions are sleeping and up on a ledge far from the viewing glass, but last Sunday they were walking around, and one of them even walked right up against the viewing glass! I've seen lions up close before, but not for a long time and never the gorgeous white lion until last week.

Hippos – The hippos are in their indoor enclosure for the winter, and even though their room seems somewhat cramped, the animals don't seem unhappy, and it's very cool to see these HUGE animals up close. It's amazing to me that their small pool must get very deep very fast in order to allow the animal to be completely submerged. As we watched, the hippo was bobbing for apples, and he caught his apple and swallowed it whole. This hippo was so large that the apple in his mouth looked about as big as a grape would look in the mouth of a human being. And this provided an extreme close-up of his humongous teeth!

Gorillas – When we got to the gorilla exhibit, it was empty. But a friendly zookeeper told us to stick around for about 10 minutes for gorilla feeding time. We then got to watch as the keepers threw greens, fruit, and straw all around the enclosure; taking care to place some on the various ledges and hide some within crevices of the exhibit (seriously, am I too

old to embark on this as a career?!? I'm afraid so...)). Then they let the gorillas back in, and it was a frenzy. Well, an orderly frenzy – there was no pushing nor shoving; just some excited gorillas foraging in their exhibit. They quickly found all the hidden surprises, and we laughed as one of the females hoarded as much lettuce as she could carry and brought it up to a high ledge to enjoy it all by herself.

Elephants – The elephants were indoors, and the now 6-year-old baby Louie was using his trunk to eat jello off the floor. I really enjoy watching elephants use their trunks; it's fascinating to me how dexterous they are – almost like they have 2 fingers on the end. But we've watched Louie grow up ever since we've been coming to this zoo when he was just a year or two old, and now he's getting pretty big! Last time we were at the zoo, he was trying to get down a step so he could get to the water, and he ended up going backwards down the step – it was so cute!

So great day, awesome fun as always! Like I said, every visit is different, and I am never disappointed! I am a zoo-addict!

And Speaking Of Discoveries...

Unlike my Steve Wilkos show discovery, the following revelation is a great one! My daughter brought home a Weekly Reader from school – you know, it's like a newspaper for kids. We used to get those when I was in school too, and I really enjoyed them. So we're sitting in the waiting area of H & R Block waiting for my husband to get our taxes done, and my 9-year-old daughter says to me, "Mom, did you know that they found an animal that they haven't seen for, like, a really long time? They thought there weren't any more left in

the world! It looks like a Furby!" We talked about extinction for a little bit, and then my daughter said she couldn't remember what the animal was called or where they found it. So when we got home, she showed me the Weekly Reader, and I found that she was talking about the pygmy tarsier. Scientists believed this type of primate went extinct because no one had seen any specimens for about 70 years, but they recently found two males and a female tarsier alive in Indonesia. The animals each weigh only about 2 oz.!

So yes, it's safe to say this is a much better discovery for me than the Steve Wilkos show. Here's hoping the pygmy tarsier can re-populate and once again establish itself as a thriving species! And thanks to the Weekly Reader which has been publishing great kid-oriented articles for decades. These stories help youngsters develop many different kinds of interests in the world around them!

The Crabby Magician

Saturday was one of the funnest days I've had in a long time. I've been having *major* zoo-fever lately, and my husband knew this and renewed our Toledo Zoo membership online before I even woke up Saturday morning. When I finally arose, he said, how about going to the zoo today? So we packed up all the kids, and took advantage of the almost 50° weather and headed to the zoo. We first ate lunch at our new favorite eating establishment in the Toledo area; a place called Nick's Cafe on Reynolds Road in Maumee. They have excellent gyros and scrumptious Greek salads, just to name a couple of their delicious dishes... pretty much everything is made from scratch. Potatoes are sliced up for french fries right there in the kitchen, gyros are off the spit, the burger meat is

hand-rolled... you get the idea. Awesome food and great service too. Highly recommended from this hard-to-please food critic!

On Saturday, everyone at Nick's was staring at us because of our ~~four~~ five adorable kids – we let our oldest invite her friend along who had slept over the night before. It made for a mini-van filled to capacity, but I'm so glad we invited her because she is a great kid, a big help (especially with our little ones because in her family, she is smack dab in the middle of 5 in birth order and knows how to help in cases of sibling rivalry!), and she had never been to a zoo before! If I had known that, we would have taken her sooner... **Every kid needs to get to a zoo!** This little girl is 9-years-old and for me, a highlight of my trip on Saturday was getting to witness her experience the zoo for the first time: the cuteness of a real-life cheetah, the immensity of a white rhinoceros, the playfulness of the baby orangutans... I'm currently reading Jack Hanna's new book, *My Wild Life* right now and it details many of the trials and tribulations the Director Emeritus of the Columbus Zoo has gone through to get where he is today. In one chapter, he addresses his many critics (people who protest live animals being held captive in zoos, as well as protesting Jack's taking animals on television show appearance tours), and Jack says something in defense of these practices which I completely agree with: Captive animals are ambassadors of their cousins in the wild. We NEED to have zoos and reach out to the public with animal tv appearances; it's the only way to get people to care enough to help with conservation.

So anyway on Saturday, after lunch, we made our way to the zoo. When we first got in, we discovered there was going to be a magic show in the Museum of Science (one of those old Works Progress Administration buildings from the post-Great Depression era; I love their architecture!). We settled in with the kids looking forward to a fun show. My husband is into magic, and we staged a magic show for our local theater company a few years ago, so I know a little bit about how some

tricks are performed – enough to know that this guy hired by the Toledo Zoo last Saturday was simply *awful*. First, he began the show with a crabby demeanor. He didn't have much charisma or charm; he wasn't very good with the kids, and his tricks *stank* – everything he performed could be bought in a magic store for under \$100 – for the whole lot! And during the show, he would literally sum up his tricks with one sentence – “and that's the magic coloring book.” Also, according to my husband, he continuously broke one of the cardinal rules of magic – telling his audience what to expect ahead of time. For example, he had a ball trick where he told the audience, “Wouldn't it be amazing if the red ball were no longer on the top?” And then *magically*, it wasn't... Amazing trick, maybe; amazing magician, I think not... On top of all that, he messed up some tricks (which happens, I guess... a little hard to forgive when it involves tricks this simple, but...), and announced the fact that he did indeed mess them up! Oh well, this “magic” show was free with zoo admission. I was a little anxious after the first 7 or 8 minutes; wanting to make sure we had enough time to see actual animals, but the kids seemed to like the show, so we did not leave the magic show before its finale. I will mention that we literally broke into a run when the guy announced that he was doing a puppet show next... Our 4-year-old was asking to see it, but I cannot imagine what that guy (his name is [Chris Clark](#) and you can click on his name to visit his website if you're interested in renting a ~~magician entertainer~~ popcorn machine) would do with puppets, so we told her we missed the puppet show... Besides, we were at the zoo to see animals, and we were running out of time! Here is a picture of the crabby magician (sorry Derek for the large pics – I don't really have time to be trying to figure out how to change code):



But not a terrible experience, because look at the amazement on the face of our 4-year-old when she witnessed the “magic”:



Luckily, we did get out of the magic show in time to see lots of animals at the zoo. The elephants were moved from their outdoor exhibit to indoors, and in the process, they crossed the path right in front of us zoo visitors:



Then, the silverback (dominating male and largest) gorilla was sitting right up against the glass of his exhibit, and at the Toledo Zoo, the visitors are allowed to get right up close and personal with the great apes. Unfortunately, I had run out of available space on my camera after taking so many pictures of the worst magician in the world – I was worried people wouldn't believe me about how awful he was, so I made sure to snap lots of pics! But anyway, the silverback gorilla was right there, and as we did with the chimp just minutes before, we held up everything we had in our arsenal (double-stroller) that we thought might interest him, but all to no avail. Maybe he likes shiny things, we thought, so we held up our car keys. Maybe he will recognize babies, we decided, so we held up our 7 month old son... and no reaction (held up the baby with caution since witnessing a gorilla CHARGE a little boy and pound the glass really hard in his exhibit in Omaha Nebraska years ago)... This gorilla stayed cool as a cucumber

and didn't react to any of it.

My one complaint about this zoo visit (besides the magic show!) is: where the heck is the octopus? He is usually one of our favorite animals to see at the zoo, and this time he was missing – something else was in his tank. That's disappointing, the octopus was always fascinating for our family and fun to watch. I hope nothing bad happened to him...

Dinner at Steak N Shake after the zoo was also a fun treat – yes, even Steak N Shake is a treat when you live in a rural utopia like we do since the closest decent sit-down chain restaurant is an hour away. A fun treat (had to be something casual after a big day with 5 kids who had had a sleepover the night before), and Disney, our 2-year-old, went poopie on the potty for the first time EVER at Steak N Shake! That reminds me, we used to live in the same town – Normal, IL (which is actually anything but normal) as the very first Steak N Shake restaurant – it is (or at least was 10 years ago when we lived there) still in its original building – too bad I wasn't into history as much then as I am now... Oh well, anyway, extremely fun time at the zoo. And as I always ask the kids, what was your favorite animal that you saw today? Mine was the silverback gorilla. He was magnificent. For awhile, the gorillas were my favorite animal to see at the zoo. Then we visited frequently last summer and got to know the family of orangutans, especially dad Boomer (an extraordinary orang because he actually plays with and helps care for his offspring – orangs in the wild and even in captivity are very easily annoyed with youngsters). Boomer and the fam are doing great and only fell short of being my favorite animal at the zoo this weekend because of the close proximity of the humongous silverback gorilla... Maybe my preferences will reverse next spring when I visit and the orangs are back outside and pushing their button which sprays water upon unsuspecting zoo guests... Looking forward to that!

Zoo Traveler

I really like to travel (NO FLYING THOUGH!), and we were fortunate enough to do lots of it – before we had so many little kids, of course. We still try to make a yearly trip to Florida, especially while we can still fit the entire family in one car – something that soon won't be easily accomplished as the kids grow older. At each travel destination, I have to admit that my favorite tourist attraction is always the local zoo. I made a list of all the zoos and/or wildlife parks I have visited, and I hope to add to it soon! Here is the list by state, country, or territory, followed by the city in which it's located. An asterisk following the zoo means it no longer exists. I put notes about some of the places in *italics* as sort of a guide in case you're interested in visiting one of those particular attractions and want some info straight from a tourist's mouth.

California:

Sea World San Diego

San Diego Zoo

Canada:

Bird Kingdom Niagara Falls Aviary, Niagara Falls, Ontario

Marineland, Niagara Falls, Ontario – *this place is very cool. You can hand-feed deer, Beluga Whales or even Orcas (Killer Whales). You can throw food down to bears who beg and do tricks. There are also a variety of amusement park rides for the whole family. Look at me petting the Orca!*



Washington, DC

National Zoo

Florida:

Wooten's Wildlife Park, Florida Everglades – *a cool, family owned place where you can see animals on display; including alligators, crocodiles, and Florida panthers. You can also hold and feed baby alligators! I wonder if they still exist; their website hasn't been updated since '06!*

Sea World, Orlando

Gatorland, Orlando

Animal Kingdom, Orlando

Idaho:

Zoo Boise, Boise

Illinois:

Brookfield Zoo, Brookfield – *this is the zoo I grew up going*

to. In the 80's when I was a frequent visitor, they had many 'celebrity' animals, with interesting stories to match.

Shedd Aquarium, Chicago

Peoria Wildlife Park, Peoria

Cosley Zoo, Wheaton

Glen Oak Zoo, Peoria

Henson Robinson Zoo, Springfield

Miller Park Zoo, Bloomington – yuck, not one of my favorite places. Their tiger exhibits consisted of teeny tiny cages, and they had a really scrawny, terrible looking tiger, at least in the late '90's when we lived in the area. Hopefully they've cleaned the place up.

Scovill Zoo, Decatur

Indiana:

Ft Wayne Children's Zoo – a perfectly sized zoo to visit with kids. They have a wide variety of animals and some nice exhibits. They just recently built a chair-lift type ride that will take you over the lion exhibit once it's finished – cool and scary at the same time!

Potawatomi Zoo, South Bend

Fun Spot, Angola

Michigan:

Binder Park, Battle Creek

Minnesota:

Minneapolis Zoo, Minneapolis

Missouri:

St Louis Zoo, St. Louis

Nebraska:

Henry Doorly Zoo, Omaha – I know they've since rebuilt it, but when I visited back in 2001-2002, they had a teeny-tiny exhibit for the gorillas, which made them none too happy. I actually witnessed a huge male gorilla charge a kid and beat on the glass from his small exhibit – scary!

Henry Doorly safari park, Omaha

Folsom Children's Zoo, Lincoln – *a very nice little zoo located in the heart of Lincoln. It's so well-laid out that you can forget you're in the middle of a capital city, and they have lots of animals in a variety of nice exhibits.*

Ohio:

African Safari Wildlife Park, Port Clinton – *I love this place! You can feed deer, elands, huge buffalo and a variety of hoofed mammals from the comfort of your own vehicle. In season, they have pig races, animals shows, and camel and pony rides for the little ones.*

Akron Zoo, Akron – *I was really impressed with the layout, exhibits, and the happiness of the animals – a very impressive little zoo!*

Cincinnati Zoo, Cincinnati

Cleveland Metroparks Zoo, Cleveland

Columbus Zoo, Columbus – *a zoo no one had heard about until my favorite celebrity, Jack Hanna got ahold of it and made it a world-reknown facility. Huge zoo, and the only place to see my favorite animals, manatees in my home state of Ohio!*

**Sea World Ohio, Aurora – we actually lived in Illinois at the time we visited here, but I'm glad we got to see it before they sold it to Six Flags, who sold it to Cedar Fair. Any of the other Sea Worlds are quite a hike from IL or OH for that matter, especially for a non-flyer such as myself.*

Toledo Zoo, Toledo

Pennsylvania:

Pittsburgh Zoo – *very impressive zoo! Lots of kid-friendly playgrounds and interactive areas. The polar bear habitat looked really cool – people go through a tunnel that the bears can swim over – but we didn't see it since the bears weren't in the pool. I NEED a second look at this zoo and will definitely allow more time when I get back there!*

ZOOAMERICA North American Wildlife Park, Hershey – *We did not care for this zoo at all. We visited in the late '90's, so*

maybe they've added more to it by now. But at that time, they only had animals indigenous to North America, and let's face it, those are easy to spot in most areas of the U.S. And let's face it, the real star tourist destination in Hershey is the chocolate factory!

South Dakota:

Great Plains Zoo and Museum, Sioux Falls – I visited here with my family when I was 15. This place was amusing to us because attached to the zoo is the museum, which has many taxidermied specimens. We joked that this zoo had more dead animals than live ones!

**Marineland, Rapid City – note the asterisk, this place doesn't exist anymore, thank goodness. When we visited in the summer of '93, they had dolphins and sea lions held in such tiny cages and pools, it was sickening. I haven't been able to find much info on this place, but I'm sure they were shut down because of poor treatment of their animals. I can only hope the animals found a better home.*

Bear Country USA, Rapid City – a cool drive-thru bear habitat experience – keep those windows rolled up!!! And check out the baby bear nursery – so adorable!

Wisconsin:

Henry Vilas Zoo, Madison

**Serpent Safari, Wisconsin Dells*

GRAND TOTAL AS OF 2009:

41 animal-themed places in 2 countries, 13 states, 1 district... and counting!

A Living Breathing Hoax

A while ago, I decided to write a series within my blog about animals, my favorite things. I just can't find enough time to learn about animals, and I love sharing knowledge about their incredible attributes. Here is chapter two in my Interesting Animals series. To read chapter one about a scaly mammal called the pangolin, [click here](#).

For chapter two, I chose to focus on the duck-billed platypus; an animal who is so strange looking that people thought it to be a hoax when it was first discovered in 1798.

The platypus is one of 3-5 species (depending on the source – animal knowledge is very differential) of monotremes or egg-laying mammals. I know, at one point we were all taught that one of the characteristics of mammals is that they give birth to live young, but that is not the case. Monotremes lay eggs, and the platypus join echidnas (spiny anteaters) in this animal order. The platypus is found in Australia – seems like they have all the cool animals, doesn't it? I just wish they weren't so stingy with their animals. I know they stopped loaning out the Tasmanian Devil years ago, and now that the last one died (it resided in Fort Wayne Indiana until its death – I could kick myself for not making the less than hour trip over there to see it while it was alive), the only place to see them is in Australia. The same goes for the platypus. I've visited many zoos, and I've never seen a live platypus. A quick check on the internet reveals that they are only found in Australian zoos.

But anyway, aside from being an aquatic (with water-repellent fur), egg-laying mammal, another cool thing about the platypus is that the males are actually poisonous. Both genders have a spur on their left foot, but the males' spur produces enough venom to really hurt a human being. Here is a picture of the duck-billed platypus – note the soft, leathery duck-bill which

is actually used by the animal to sense the electric fields caused by its moving prey (feeds on shrimp, fish eggs, small fish, and aquatic invertebrates found in streams and lakes).



Easy to see how this duck-billed, beaver-tailed, otter-footed, egg-laying mammal was once thought to be an elaborate man-made fraud, huh?

How Sweet It Is

Two different family members sent me an email forward with the following video because they knew I'd love it. They were right! The following is a touching story about the unlikely but very true friendship between a dog and an elephant – you

have to see it to believe it!

Cute And Cuddly? I Think Not.

Did you hear the one about the Chinese man who found himself in a dilemma? His son's toy fell into the panda enclosure at the zoo, so he jumped in after it. The panda attacked him, and because the creatures are so coveted in China, he didn't fend off the animal because he feared he would injure him. He survived the attack, as did the other 2 victims of this particular panda. But as the below article notes, in China, there is no "3 strikes, you're out" policy for pandas because they are so highly regarded. Particularly amusing is the tale of the drunken tourist who was also a victim of this malicious panda. Read about Gu Gu the not-so-nice panda here:

(CNN) – Gu Gu is not your typical soft and cuddly giant panda. Zhang Jiao was attacked by Gu Gu the panda when he fell into the pen at the Beijing Zoo on Wednesday.

Zhang Jiao was attacked by Gu Gu the panda when he fell into the pen at the Beijing Zoo on Wednesday.

For the third time, he's tasted the flesh of an unwitting intruder in his pen at the Beijing Zoo.

His most recent victim was 28-year-old Zhang Jiao, who told CNN he fell into the panda pen Wednesday while trying to catch a small toy thrown by his young son.

"My son and I were playing with a panda doll, throwing it to each other, when I dropped with the toy" into the pen, Zhang said.

The barrier around the pen is about 5 feet tall, but on the other side is a drop of 9 to 10 feet, and Zhang says he could not climb out.

That's when Gu Gu went on the attack.

The 240-pound giant panda sunk his teeth into Zhang's left leg before moving on to the right leg.

"The panda is a national treasure, and I love and respect [him], so I didn't fight back," Zhang said. "The panda didn't let go until it chewed up my leg and its mouth was dripping with my blood."

Zookeepers needed to use tools to pry open Gu Gu's jaws.

Zhang said he never imagined a panda could be so vicious.

"I always thought they were cute and just ate bamboo," Zhang said.

According to Dr. Wang Tianbing, who treated Zhang, his wounds were severe, especially the damage done to the muscle and ligaments in his left leg.

"Normally, we think the panda is very tender animal, but actually it's a bear, not a cat. If the animal thinks it will be hurt by human beings, it is very dangerous."

Wang should know. In 2007, he treated another one of Gu Gu's victims, a 15-year-old boy who climbed into the pen to get a closer look. A year earlier, state media reported that a drunken tourist tried to hug the panda, who bit him. In an odd twist, the tourist reportedly bit back.

But being an endangered species and much-loved national icon means there's no "three strikes and you're out" for Gu Gu.

In fact, there's a possibility Zhang may face charges for entering the panda pen.

Zoo officials did not respond to CNN's request for an interview but are reportedly considering new measures to keep tourists out of Gu Gu's pen.

A panda's mouth dripping with blood? That sounds like a horror movie!

You Dirty Rat(s)

According to Wikipedia.com, James Cagney never actually said the line, "*You Dirty Rat*". The closest he got was saying "Come out and take it, you dirty, yellow-bellied rat, or I'll give it to you through the door!" in *Taxi*. But *rats*! That's not the point of this post.

Seems I couldn't resist adding to the Food Chain Gang – we've added two pet rats to our family, Bobby and Oreo – the kids chose the names. It was kind of an impulsive activity to do today, pet shopping, but it was not an impulsive decision, the type that should never accompany a new pet. We've been talking about getting a rat for some time now, but if it ended up being the wrong decision for our family, we didn't want to *be like rats leaving a sinking ship* and ditch the responsibility. So we've been thinking about it a lot, and today just seemed like the right day to do it.

Rats are friendly, intelligent, non-biting rodents who make great pets. Rat owners compare their companionship to that of dogs, believe it or not, and from what I've seen so far, I see what they're talking about. I think rats haven't caught on as pets because many people don't like the way their tails look, and they still have a negative stigma from a few incidents of centuries past, namely the Black Death outbreak and the legend of the Pied Piper of Hamelin. I did some research about both of these historical tales – not that they influenced my decision to get the rats as pets; the research was just for fun. But I found that the Bubonic Plague, aka the Black Death

was most likely transmitted by fleas rather than rats. True the fleas would travel on the rats, but they more commonly preferred larger hosts such as dogs or cats and used rats when larger animals were unavailable. The Bubonic Plague was attributed to causing the demise of one quarter of the Earth's population of human beings at that time, it's hard to blame people for taking it out on rats. And the Pied Piper story is basically a legend that tries to explain the disappearance of over 100 children from the town of Hamelin in Germany just before the year 1300. Most likely, the children were recruited to newer European settlements, possibly by a man in "pied" clothing. In the legend, there is a rat infestation in Hamelin, and the Pied Piper leads the rats out of the town to a body of water where they all drown. The townspeople neglect to pay the Piper for his rat removal services, and he returns and leads their children out of town. Some versions claim they went to a cave, some say another village, and there are even a few versions that say the Piper had ill intentions toward the children – in one they meet a fate similar to the rats. I enjoyed some of the rat research I read and wanted to share it. If you want to continue the research on your own, I've added to the level of the cheesiness (and length) of this post by putting some common sayings involving rats in *italics* – try looking them up; the origins are interesting. But anyway, back to our new little friends.

When we were at the pet store, I didn't want any part of picking out the rat. I felt like they are only in pet stores to become snake food (which is why I won't join the *rat race* and work in a pet store, as much as I'd like to do the other work in the store), and I didn't want to have to see the ones that wouldn't get saved. As it is, I went over there to take a glance, saw little Bobby, who was about to be put back in the snake food tank, and that's what prompted me to say, "Maybe we should get two." The pet store sent the rats home to us like this, a brown bag lunch for snakes, thus proving my point:



The rats my family chose for us are 4 week old brothers. They are adorable, incredibly tame, and I've already really bonded with Bobby. He cuddles me and sits on me and grooms himself – rats are actually very clean animals. The entire start-up for this type of pet set us back about \$25.

\$2.99 per rat + \$3 for bedding + \$9 cage + \$3 food (for about 3 weeks worth) + \$2 water bottle + tax. We are going to be resourceful about toys and use my kids' toys for the rats – we've already found that they like to crawl through these foam tunnel blocks they have. And we were very resourceful when making their cage as well. Instead of trying to decide between the \$19 glass aquarium and the \$24 hamster cage (I was concerned about the heaviness and the breakable glass of the aquarium and worried the rats would escape the cage), we opted for secret option #3 – a large \$9 transparent Rubbermaid bin with a lid in which we poked air holes. Overall, I'm very happy so far with the new pet decision, and my major concerns have not come to fruition which were: 1. that our Jack (Jerk) Russell Terrier mix would try to hunt the rats, and 2. that the kids would unwittingly hurt the rats. But our dog has not even noticed that the rats are here yet (she's almost 11 and her sense of smell is failing faster than I thought – that makes me a little sad), and we laid down strict rules for the kids about handling the rats. I was also worried about having yet another chore to do around the house, but I was promised help from both of the enthusiastic new pet owners (there's a sucker born every minute). Here are the cuties – Bobby is the

beige one and Oreo is the gray and white one:

