

Who Needs David Attenborough?

I am sure we have all watched in breathless awe at least one of his amazing wildlife programmes such as *Life on Earth*. Who knew that, an hour's drive away, we could see so many of these same creatures for ourselves, up close and personal, in Darkest Doncaster. Welcome to the Yorkshire Wildlife Park, our excursion for September.

The site opened in 2009 and occupies some 100 acres. It is home to 500 animals of 100 species. It is divided into geographical areas where you can see animals from that region in spacious, open enclosures looking well cared for and content, so pleasant and reassuring to see. There are plenty of mobility scooters for hire (as there is a lot of walking involved) and play areas for children. Even more important is the welcome choice of eating establishments scattered throughout. Members of staff were plentiful and helpful. There were also regular talks about the different species, so it was very educational too.

You could begin in Pangea, where we were treated to a realistic display of dinosaurs of various sizes and ferocity. One was fully occupied laying an egg (omelettes for life from one egg, folks!) Or you could head towards the Atlantic Forest, Himalayan Pass or nearby cheetah territory. Sea lions made themselves heard at Point Lobos. But when you have three of the African Big Five (leopard, lion, rhino, elephant, buffalo) so close, that is where I headed first.

I find the Big Cat family fascinating with their effortless economy of movement. The weather was pleasantly warm and sunny, so the lions were basking contentedly in their large enclosure. There was one massive male which made me very grateful for the high wire fence. Rhinos were close by and unbelievably huge. Elegant giraffes formed a graceful contrast. After a pit stop at The Courtyard, we visited possibly the cutest animals there, the ring-tailed lemurs who adored the sun, sitting upright, legs akimbo, exposing furry tummies to the warm rays and the gaze of the visitor! What was even better was that they were free to run about and sit inches from your feet, totally unafraid. If only humans and animals could always coexist as peacefully.

There were two polar bear enclosures, one of 10 acres, the habitat modelled on the Arctic tundra they are used to. These huge predators, too, enjoyed the sunshine, walking off occasionally for a cooling swim. The two tigers had to be kept separate, but the younger of the two was quite happy to strut her stuff for the viewers, soaking in the mini waterfall in her enclosure. The highlight for me was seeing the leopard at feeding time. Earlier in the day it had kept well out of sight, but as the thought of dinner approached, it appeared and paced soundlessly past the viewing platform. The sunlight glinting on the fantastic camouflage of its back and tail was something I will never forget. I have only mentioned the highlights; you must go and see for yourselves. Thanks to Steve, Brian and Chris for organising a trip that was so completely different to the norm and so worthwhile. Thanks also to Stewart for his usual smooth driving.

Whilst we were there, we noticed film cameras near the lemurs. Was David Attenborough about to swing from the trees or were they there to film Brian, that endangered species? In fact, they were there to film the benefits of poo! It turns out that lemur droppings, amongst others, are being tested for naturally occurring viruses in them which can kill certain bacteria, even where antibiotics fail to work. The team from Sheffield University, led by Professor Graham Stafford, believe that these viruses could eliminate the threat of many antibiotic-resistant bacteria, not only saving lives but also about £1 billion PER YEAR to the NHS! We wish their research every success. It just shows, once again, man and nature are part of the same wonderful universe and work best when in harmony. Such places as this wonderful park are a timely reminder of this.

Barbara Pearce

