



# White Lions Are “Mane” Attraction in New Braunfels

by Susan Marx

Long known locally for its collection of venomous snakes and crocodilians, Animal World and Snake Farm Zoo surprised the community in January by announcing their newest attraction - a pair of white lion cubs! These beautiful baby lions are just four and a half months old and already drawing crowds. They are spectacular specimens, destined to be high-profile animal ambassadors for the cause of conservation and New Braunfels' up and coming zoo.

The new white lion cubs are an unrelated male and female, so it's possible they may mate and give birth to other white lions; however even if they do have babies, it's still several years away and there's no guarantee their babies would have the recessive gene that makes them white. Motswari is the name of the male lion cub, which means “to preserve and protect.” It's also the name of the only African preserve where white lions are found. The female cub was named Ngala, which means lion in Swahili, the native language of Timbavati, South Africa where they were both born. Motswari and Ngala bound into view three times a day at Animal World as stars of the brand new “Ghosts of the Jungle” show.

Big cat trainers Kevin Gershner and Jessica Darby work with all the mammals and primates at Animal World but they are especially devoted to the white lion cubs. They came to New Braunfels in June from working with tigers in Myrtle Beach, Florida. “We aren't really training Motswari and Ngala at this stage,” says Kevin, “but we do spend several hours a day interacting with them.” Jessica adds that in a way the daily interaction IS training them because they learn through these bonding periods. “If they bite or try to scratch we raise our voice and tell them 'no'. They understand the word no; we also try to use positive reinforcement during playtime, enrichment and training sessions as much as possible to encourage desired behavior when interacting with their trainers.”



At night, Jessica and Kevin lay down with the cubs and stay with them until they fall asleep. It's quite a commitment, Kevin explains. “They think of us as their parents and call out to us when they see us coming” This is all a part of socializing them and desensitizing them to humans. “We are stimulating behavior they would have with their parents in the wild,” says Jessica. This will make it possible to work with them when they're fully grown. “They will let us clip their nails, draw blood and do ultrasounds on the female.” There are several mountain lions on exhibit here too but they were not socialized as babies so the trainers don't enter the habitat with them.

Only three small prides of white lions exist in the African wild today – and they are only safe on a preserve with electric fences to keep poachers at bay. Limited space on the preserve (cont.)



makes it unsafe for all of them to breed. So how did these incredibly rare white lion cubs come to call a small, exotic animal park in New Braunfels their home?

Dr. Eric Trager, the newest Animal World and Snake Farm Zoo owner, is the man making things happen behind the scenes. "I bought the business in 2007 with the goal of making it an accredited zoo," Trager says, "and so I could educate thousands of people instead of just rescuing dozens of animals. I thought education would have the largest and most lasting impact in the long run." He accomplished that goal two years ago. Trager is well on his way to putting his privately owned zoo on the map as a home for exotics and endangered species.

**"I never planned for it to work out this way,"** says Trager. He grew up in Manhattan Beach, California and started rescuing animals in his teens. Eventually he became known for animal rescue. "I'm the guy animal control would call when an alligator crossed the road." He's rescued rattlesnakes, emus, cobras, injured dogs, bobcats and even raised a pair of wolves. "One day, I realized that I couldn't save them all. That's when someone told me this place was for sale."

Now an expert in the care and conservation of animals, Trager also sidelines as a certified zoo inspector, making sure other zoos are up to snuff and the animals are being cared for properly. "We go through rigorous inspections from city, county and federal officials as well as the Zoological Association of America which documents diet protocols, animal enrichment plans, medical services, emergency procedures, back-up emergency procedures and a host of other things."

Trager is passionate about creating the best habitats in the world for his animals and has travelled all over the United States to learn how to make the best habitat for each species. Right now he's renovating all the existing habitats at Animal World to make them more aesthetic and more enriching for

the animals. One of the newest exhibits is for a pair of Asian Otters. It's a giant aquarium-like enclosure that allows them to swim and dive in close proximity to the guests.

A year from this August, Trager plans to start construction on a new 6,000 square foot entrance and guest facility with a place for kids' parties, education and a gift shop. He'll also start expanding the zoo onto 20 adjacent acres behind the existing park. Within five years the zoo will be several times its current size and will have tigers, hippos, bears and a monkey island.

**"As we build our site and create new and improved habitats for our animals, we'll be adding more endangered species."**

-Dr. Eric Trager

"As we build our site and create new and improved habitats for our animals, we'll be adding more endangered species," Trager said. "This is an opportunity for me to help educate the public about wildlife conservation. It's about reaching kids and giving them an experience. I believe the greatest form of education is an emotional experience and, in my opinion, a child's bond with an animal is one of the greatest in life." Big cat and primate trainers Kevin and Jessica are also devoted to this goal and will be putting on staged shows with the cats and primates.

Right now, the white lion cubs are the mane event. They're gaining about a half a pound a day and in three years will be full grown. Visitors are likely to see animals here they've never seen before. Animal World currently has a pair of Capybara (the largest rodents on earth), many types of exotic birds, monkeys, lemurs, three humongous pythons and 35 full-grown crocodiles and alligators – who put on a live show on Sundays during the summer months.



**So come on out and meet Motswari and Ngala, Marvin the baby pot-bellied pig, Tank the baby miniature horse and the rest of the growing family at Animal World and Snake Farm Zoo. It's sure to be a day with the family you won't soon forget!**





Animal World & Snake Farm owner Dr. Eric Trager plays with white lion cubs Motswari and Nigala



Uryia Govolt of Smith, TX holds 12 year old Ball Python named 'Ms. Paackman' during a trip to the Animal World and Snake Farm.





# FAQ

Animal World & Snake Farm Zoo  
5640 IH-35 South  
New Braunfels, Texas  
(830) 608-9270

[www.exoticanimalworld.com](http://www.exoticanimalworld.com)  
[www.facebook.com/animalworldandsnakefarm](http://www.facebook.com/animalworldandsnakefarm)



What makes a zoo a zoo? Zoological Association of America board member Alan Sironen says:

1. A zoo has specific dietary and enrichment protocols to ensure animal welfare
2. A zoo engages in cooperative breeding practices to maintain a sustainable gene pool
3. A zoo has direction and focus on educating the public
4. A zoo makes monetary contributions to animals in the wild (conservation groups)
5. A zoo is licensed and accredited every five years.

- It takes about 10,000 hours to train and desensitize a baby lion. The same trainers work with them every day and are like their parents. They never tranquilize the cubs or force any behavior.

- Conservationist and author Linda Tucker leads the charge to save the almost extinct white lions in Africa with her Global White Lion Trust – learn more at [www.whitelions.org](http://www.whitelions.org)

- The first white lions were sighted in 1938. Many believed they were mythological creatures until an American biologist stumbled on a pride in 1975 and photographed them.

- It is estimated that there are only 200-300 white lions left in the world. Most of these are in captivity but they are not on the endangered list because they are a subspecies of the Kruger lion.

- The worldwide lion population has declined from approximately 100,000 to 20,000 over the last century. It is believed that lions will be on the endangered list in the next decade.

- When they are full grown, a female lion weighs about 350 pounds and a male about 500 pounds. Their paws get as big as dinner plates and their claws grow as long as a human pinkie finger.

- The male lion gets his mane when he is about three years old and at the same age a bone grows in his throat that gives him a roar which can be heard two miles away.