*Suggested headline:*

***Kids and capybaras, a cuteness overload***

**By Bill Barth and Stephanie Klett**

Some things can only be experienced.

The majesty of mountains. The sound of an ocean wave. The solitude of a walk in the Northwoods.

Here’s another: Seeing your grandkids ignite with joy and laughter as they come literally face-to-face with some of the planet’s most unusual animals.

We had the pleasure recently at Safari Lake Geneva. “Jungle Jay” Christie and wife Maggie, owners of the unique animal conservation spread, hosted us along with son John, daughter-in-law Amanda, and grandkids Jackson, 5, and Khloe, 2.

Now the boy, by the way, is kind of partial to being called “Jungle Jack.”

It wasn’t our first time visiting this unique drive-through wildlife preserve, but it was the first time with the kids. Understand, going back a second, third or sixth time is not like watching a rerun on television. Animals are like people. There’s always something new to see and experience.

For 2025 that’s the Capybara Encounter, featuring two of the trendiest and most popular critters around. It feels a bit odd to call rodents almost cuddly; nevertheless, it’s accurate. These natives of Central and South America were bottle-fed babies and are completely comfortable around people. They’ll eat lettuce right out of your hand. They share an enclosure with a family of curious squirrel monkeys, who liked to watch Jack and Khloe feed the capybaras.

The monkeys are small – the largest weighs in at just around two pounds.

“They’re here in a walk-through exhibit,” Jay explained, “one of only two in the whole country where you can do that. You can get within inches of a fully functional family of South American monkeys.”

Mesh covers the enclosure, which seems ready-made for incorporating small birds into the scene. Jay says that’s likely to happen in the future.

The two female capys are about half grown and can reach a weight of 150 pounds. Their appetites are huge and they will eat all the lettuce they can get, but that’s not all. Capy wrangler Kara Ritacco explained.

“One of the closest relatives these guys have is our household pet, the guinea pig,” Kara said. “These guys are basically giant guinea pigs. They only eat roots and vegetables. They can eat up to 24 heads of lettuce at our encounters. Plus they have their diets in the back, sweet peppers, sweet potatoes, oranges.”

The capybara enclosure – named after Jay and Maggie’s daughter, it’s called Audrey’s Amazon Adventure – includes a pool and an adjacent petting farm, a highlight for Jack and Khloe to touch smaller animals including antelope, alpacas and llamas. Capys love the water.

“They are the chillest animal that you can feed,” Kara said. “They normally will sleep in the pond up to their eyeballs, like an alligator. They just snooze and eat.”

Safari Lake Geneva would be cool even if the tour ended there.

It doesn’t. The animal sanctuary is designed for patrons to drive their own vehicles through the grounds for close encounters with a wide variety of animals.

Maggie told us there are about “150-ish” animals present, roaming free within around 30 acres of the 75 she and her husband own.

“We have a double fence all the way around to keep our animals in,” she said. And it’s also designed to keep other animals out, like Wisconsin’s ubiquitous white-tailed deer.

The preserve includes numerous species. We won’t try to name them all, but here are a few: giraffe, zebra, camel, emu, ostrich, nyala, blackbuck, miniature donkey, water buffalo, yak, highland cattle and bison.

We asked Maggie if she had a favorite.

“The bison. They’ve been my favorite since we opened. We bottle fed one, and he’s almost too friendly for how big he is (nearly a ton),” she laughed. “The guests are like, ‘Wow, that is a big animal coming at my car’.”

Here’s the trick. The Christies sell small containers of animal feed. The free-roaming animals know all about it and calmly walk up to vehicles allowing occupants to hold the feed outside and watch them eat. Jack and Khloe were delirious with laughter and, soon enough, so were we all.

Jack pulled back only once, when a big ostrich got too close. “The big chicken” scared him a little, he said.

Little sister Khloe was fierce and unafraid. Which she’ll remind her brother for years.

If our six-person SUV had a favorite, it had to be the watusi cattle. To say the African breed has large horns is like saying Shaquille O’Neal has big feet. These things are enormous, sticking out at an angle like giant rabbit-ear antennas. You have to see it to believe it.

Located at W1612 Litchfield Road five miles outside Lake Geneva, the animal preserve will be 10 years old in 2026. Jay said they are planning an official ribbon-cutting for the Capybara Encounter in mid-June, but the preserve is open seven days a week now. All ticketing is handled through the website ([safarilakegeneva.com](http://safarilakegeneva.com)).

Despite the early part of the season, Jay said, “We’re already selling out on weekends” and encouraged visitors to reserve tickets ahead. The park is open through the end of October.

We highly recommend bringing the little ones. There was no doubt Khloe and “Jungle Jack” would sleep well and dream of the adventures ahead on their safari of life.

For grandparents, that’s as good as it gets.

*Bill Barth is the former Editor of the Beloit Daily News and a member of the Wisconsin Newspaper Hall of Fame. His wife, Stephanie Klett, is the President and CEO of Visit Lake Geneva, and the former Secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Tourism.*