

Happy 31st Birthday, Wheezy

Tulsa Zoo's Cape Buffalo Believed to Be Oldest Recorded in World

By Eric Flossic, Zookeeper, Tulsa Zoo

Way back on Sept. 24, 1982, when I was only three years old, a female Cape Buffalo was born at Kings Island Wild Animal Habitat in Ohio. The animal habitat at Kings Island has long since closed. Wheezy has lived on at the Tulsa Zoo, becoming what may be the oldest Cape Buffalo on record in the world.

A little more about Wheezy's background: From Ohio, Wheezy was sent to Illinois, where she went to a place called the Little Ponderosa Farm. This is where the Tulsa Zoo and Wheezy found each other. In 1987, the Tulsa Zoo was looking for a female Cape Buffalo to breed with our bull. Wheezy was at a perfect breeding age and was sent to pair up with our eligible bachelor, Idi Amin. Wheezy and Idi welcomed their first calf a year later. Wheezy went on to have 15 calves.

My story with Wheezy begins in 2001 when I was hired to work as a zookeeper in the Tulsa Zoo's large mammal department. I learned quickly to see Wheezy as a fiercely protective mom. She scared the pants off many keepers, including myself, by getting her head and front legs over stall walls during neonatal exams in an effort to get her baby back. Or while cleaning an adjacent stall, she would slam boards hard enough to splinter, making my heart race.

Wheezy's last calf was born in 2003. It was a female named Edie after her dad because she was born months after he had passed away. Mother and daughter would stay together up until 2010, when it was decided that the Tulsa Zoo would phase out Cape Buffalo from the master plan. Edie went to San Diego's Safari Park. Wheezy remained at the Tulsa Zoo because of her advanced age, 28 at the time. We feared she might not deal well with the stress of transportation or to the adjustment to a new home.

It was now time to see how Wheezy would handle retirement. Her demeanor has mellowed considerably since she is no longer in protective mom mode. Keepers are

able to apply fly spray to her whole body and scratch above her horns, neck and behind her fabulous ears.

She developed a routine of hanging out in a shaded spot under the arundo cane in the corner of her exhibit during the heat of the day. Then she would always find time to scratch her neck on the warm sand stone boulders protecting a sycamore tree in the center of her exhibit.

As her age kept increasing, I was curious to find out where she stood in the record books for longevity. After getting feedback from both the North American and European Studbooks, it was shown that no Cape Buffalo had ever reached 30 years old. The previous record in North America was 29½, and before that age 22. For Europe, the previous record was 29¾, with the next oldest living Cape Buffalo being 27. Wheezy last September reached elusive number of 30 and was given a bunch of her favorite golden rain tree browse to celebrate.

Showing no signs of slowing down, what do you do with possibly the oldest Cape Buffalo on record when the zoo's master plan is in full swing and it calls for a new mixed species exhibit for white rhinos, hoof stock and birds to be placed where the buffalo exhibit is located? The answer, build her a whole new holding yard behind the African hoof stock barn. Before her new holding yard was built, Wheezy was slowly acclimated to expanded reserve holding yards and barn stalls. This would lead her toward her new holding yard location at her own pace. Her new holding yard comes complete with two shade structures, mud wallow and access to five indoor stalls. Her former exhibit had roughly 10,600 square feet. She now has access to 15,000 square feet of outside space.

I will admit that I was skeptical at first that she would react well to such a big change so late in life. That saying of "you can't teach an old dog new tricks" is totally overrated. Wheezy has been very active in her new home, as staff is always finding that she has spent the day and night in different parts of her enclosure. The extra movement is a big positive to help keep all of those old joints from getting stiff. She has also adapted well to her new shifting routine by coming into the barn when called for her grain in the morning and at the end of the day for her favorite produce, a sweet potato.

I have had the great pleasure to work with Wheezy for the past 12 years. We have shared many fantastic moments together; she is always the first animal I check on when I get to work. Our staff treats every day we get with her as the special gift it is. So please join me and the rest of the Tulsa Zoo staff by sending a very well-deserved happy birthday to Wheezy as she sets the bar even higher at 31 years old!

