

INTRODUCTION:

[Sparkly holiday music]

Still picking at Thanksgiving leftovers, we here at AZ Central's Podcast team turn to the end of year holidays. Hanukkah has begun, and Christmas is just around the corner. Unlike much of the country, we celebrate our holidays in light jackets and flip flops. No snow for us in the Valley of the Sun.

But we're still able to get into the holiday spirit just as easily as our wintery neighbors with our local traditions -- snow or not!"

[Valley 101 Theme Music]

Welcome to Valley 101, a podcast from The Arizona Republic and AZCentral.com where we answer the questions you ask about Metro Phoenix. I'm your host, Kaila White.

In this episode, our producer Kaely Monahan went on a search for some holiday cheer, Phoenix-style...so, gather up the kids and hot chocolate, for a Christmas tale unlike the others you have heard.

[Sleigh bells fade in softly]

Kaely Monahan: It's that time of year again. When the temperature dips just a little below comfortable, and the air smells like cinnamon and pine forests. And familiar sounds tickle our ears.

And what's that light up ahead? Why, it's a mama bear and her cubs! And they're all lit up for the holidays. In fact everywhere there are lights sparkling and shimmering. Which can mean only one thing, this must be Zoolights!

[Bright Happy Music]

Justin Davis: This is our 30th anniversary.

KM: That's Justin Davis, the Zoolights supervisor.

JD: When I was a kid, I always said that I was going to work at the zoo. That was just my thing. Eight, nine years old."

KM: He never thought he'd get a job at the Phoenix zoo as the head of zoolights, however. But it turned out to be a great fit for Davis who's been working with Zoolights for close to 10 years.

Curating more than 3 million lights, Davis and his team are always looking for new inspired ways to bring the zoo to life at night.

[Light elf-like music with sleigh bells begins]

From animated 2D creatures to the 3D sculptures and the towering trees with thousands of bright bulbs, Zoolights continues to ignite good cheer and fun every holiday season. What started off with just those simple 2D incandescent displays scattered throughout the Zoo is now a fantastical jungle of LEDs of every color, shape and size.

This year there are more lantern lights -- These are the big animal structures made with steel frames and then a "skin" that gets pulled over the top...and they glow from the inside.

JD: We also have these art illuminated boxes by an artist named Russ Ronat, and it's a cool new element that we added to it this year.

KM: And the drive-thru Zoolights is back on select nights.

But as an avid Zoolights patron I had to ask about the rumor I've heard over the years -- does it really take six months to put up and another six months to take down all the lights?

JD: We start June 1st,

KM: That's blazing hot.

JD: It is. It's pretty bad. Yeah, we start in the middle of the summer and go all the way through. We try to be done by Halloween. We usually have some I's to dot T's to cross by Halloween, but for the most part, it'll all be done.

KM: Davis says Zoolights is split into four seasons: the install, the maintenance, the tear down, and then the repair.

JD: Everything you see at the zoo was built in house. So it's a crew of five of us and we all get together and we put our brains together and we think about what do we want to build, what do we want to do this year? And then we just have it happen. The 2Ds, we essentially project images onto the ground and we'll trace them. And then just bend the metal over what it looks like. And then the 3Ds, just kind of come from our brain and we'll use just black and white pictures. We printed off the internet and try to use those to get the best representation of the animal.

KM: Aside from the animalistic lights, the illuminated trees are a sight worthy of Santa's wonderland. For the massive arboreal displays, the Zoolights team needs to use a big lift to decorate the highest branches.

KM on tape: You have some pretty tall trees here. Like, I guess what's the tallest one you have to get up to?

JD: About ninety five feet, give or take 90, 95 feet. It's a giant eucalyptus.

KM: I'm guessing that's not a saguaro cactus.

JD: No, it's a giant eucalyptus.

KM: While the patrons enjoy the seasonal event, I had to ask, what about the animals? How do they react to all the lights, noises, and smells?

For the answers, I turned to Drew Foster, one of the animal curators at the Phoenix zoo.

Drew Foster: I've been at the Phoenix Zoo for 10 years as animal curator on the birds ectotherms. So that's typically what people refer to as cold blooded animals, including fish, insects, invertebrates, reptiles and amphibians. The equine farm areas and then our ambassador animal area.

KM: When I asked him how Zoolights affects the animals he said it depends.

DF: There are animals that are more sensitive that we keep those areas closed off while we're open for zoo lights, areas like walk through bird aviaries. Many of our larger mammals have access to night houses, so I'm thinking of things like the giraffe. We're standing in front of a savanna which do have night houses, and they're brought in and they're away from that sight and sound. But then there are other animals that remain on exhibit, things like our Komodo dragon. We have one Komodo dragon outdoors who is brought indoors overnight. We have another Komodo dragon that is visible while she is on exhibit indoors. She remains on exhibit, but we monitor her behavior and behaviorally she seems fine.

KM: But what if night houses aren't enough to shield them from all the excitement? Foster says the animal care teams carefully monitor all the zoo residents for signs of distress.

DF: If an animal is disturbed, it's going to give us signs. Behaviorally it's going to be off. It may not have as much of an appetite to go off food or just groggy, sleepy. Think about when you stay up late at night and we're not seeing any of that. Animals are acting normal now. Again, we do keep areas closed for those more sensitive animals, and I think of birds, you know, we keep tropical flights closed. We want to keep them a little bit more protected from that noise since at night, birds tend to go to roost and want to go to sleep.

KM: Right, right. Well, I do, too.

DF: Me too.

As for the installation and take down process, the animals might be curious but most are pretty chill. Justin Davis says they've seen it all before.

JD: One of the cool things is because when we do our install, because of when we start in the summer, we like to work late night. So we're not in the direct heat for too long. Well, some of the animals get put into their night houses or their barns, and other ones get to stay out. One in particular that sticks out to me is we have our African white rhino, Howard or Howie, and he gets very active at around five six o'clock. So most people don't get to see that. But he get, he'll eat and he gets the zoomies like a dog, and then he just passes out.

KM: I think we'd all like to see rhino zoomies. I had one more burning question before I could leave the zoo:

KM on tape: I did think of the one last question I have for me, it's a little controversial with my friends, but the dancing trees installation, the music changed from Carol of the Bells, I think about five years ago?

JD: Well, we actually tried to switch it up every year. So there's and then last year we only had one show and then this year we have I'd have to look. I know we throw in one Trans-Siberian Orchestra, a song for the, you know, the giddy up of it. And then there's another one that's a little bit slower, but we do try to switch the song every year to make sure that the show stays fresh.

KM: Well, I'm taking off my journalist hat and putting on my personal hat. "Carol of the Bells," I think, is the best one.

JD: Yeah, that one. But, you guessed that right. In fact, I think that was about five years ago.

KM: Yeah, that was a good one.

So there you have it. It's a Christmas miracle that starts every summer. Justin Davis and his team work through the blazing Arizona summers to ensure that all of Phoenix has a sparkly holiday season.

And as I made my way to the zoo exit, a handful of pink residents had something to say:

(Flamingo squawks)

My flamingo is a bit rough but I think they said "Come visit us at Zoolights!"

(Carol of the Bells music swells in)

OUTRO:

That's a lot of work that goes into making one of our season's brightest events. Makes me wonder if I can hire out the Zoolights team to put lights up on my house. Thank you producer Kaely Monahan for this charming holiday tale.

You can visit Zoolights now until January 15th. Check the Phoenix Zoo's website for details on tickets and drive-through dates.

(Valley 101 theme enters)

If you've got more questions about the Phoenix Zoo or any of Arizona's wildlife, submit them to our team at [101 dot azcentral dot com](http://101dotazcentraldotcom).

And if you're a regular listener of our show, please consider supporting it by subscribing to [azcentral dot com](http://azcentraldotcom).

And as always, thank you for listening to Valley 101, a podcast from The Arizona Republic and azcentral.com. Also if you're a fan of Arizona politics, be sure to check out The Gaggle...our sister podcast that breaks down local issues and helps you keep up with the state's political news.

And that's it for this episode! See you next week.

(Valley 101 theme fades out)