

Newt Gingrich Finds Refuge at Des Moines' Blank Park Zoo

Written by Sally Bahner

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(DES MOINES, IA) — When Newt Gingrich gets tired of fielding “gotcha questions” from the journalistic wolf packs prowling Iowa, he might want to return to Des Moines’ Blank Park Zoo where he can caucus with its hissing cockroaches.

He has already been there twice this year, according to a zoo spokesperson, once for the opening of the Australian Adventure exhibit and again in August after the Republican debate that preceded Iowa’s straw poll.

Gingrich, a Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, native, has a soft spot for zoos, which played a crucial role in his awakening to politics as a profession, a story he relates in his foreword to *America’s Best Zoos*, by Allen W. Nyhus and Jon Wassner (*Intrepid Traveler*, \$15.95).

“When I was ten, I asked how Harrisburg could get a zoo,” Gingrich wrote in *America’s Best Zoos*. “The kind older, park official ... told me they had closed the zoo during World War II because of rationing and that my job was to come to the next city council and explain why Harrisburg needed a zoo. The next Tuesday, I was right there. I have been hooked on animals, zoos, and citizenship from that point on.”

Authors Nyhus and Wassner describe Blank Park Zoo as “a standout mid-sized zoo” and praise the zoo’s African Boardwalk, where visitors can hand feed giraffes, and the Australian Trail, showcasing wallabies and emus.

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Gingrich might be disappointed that the zoo has no elephant. On the bright side, it has no donkey either.

America's Best Zoos is published by The Intrepid Traveler. It is available at bookstores, many zoo gift shops, and online at www.intrepidtraveler.com/store .