

Safety Awareness in Dangerous Animal Areas

This lesson is intended to promote safety awareness in dangerous animal areas. There are two dangerous animal areas in the zoo that use divers: Hippo Cove and Bear Line. Some buildings, such as Manatee Springs, have dangerous animals areas in other parts of the building, like the crocodile exhibit (don't worry, we don't dive in there).

Before we get into the specific dangerous animal areas you'll be entering as a diver, we're going to start with a little basic zoo etiquette when it comes to building and area access. Volunteer divers are permitted in buildings/areas only during the time of their scheduled shift. This is when keeper staff expects you and are prepared to have you in the building. **Please do not arrive at a building or area unannounced outside of your scheduled volunteer time.** Keepers may be working in other areas, conducting interviews or animal training, or there could be a sensitive veterinary procedure in progress. This is NOT the time to pound on the door looking for the bathing suit you left behind or to drop off your medical form.

This rule isn't just for volunteers. This is standard zoo etiquette. We have members of our Maintenance Department who have worked here for over 30 years and carry all-access keys, and they STILL contact keeper staff before entering a building. It's standard protocol.

Ok, now on to dangerous animal areas.

In general, when entering a dangerous animal area like Hippo holding or the Bear Tunnel, be aware of your surroundings and pay attention to signage and yellow lines on the floor indicating where it is safe to walk. Safety is survival in these areas, and staff do not have a sense of humor about violating protocols.

When you enter the Hippo building for a dive, stay behind the yellow lines on the floor. This will keep you well out of the way of the keepers going in and out of the Hippo stalls. You only need to access the dive office and shower, anyway. Never, ever step beyond the yellow lines towards the Hippo stalls unless specifically invited to do so by a Hippo keeper.

Despite how cute Fiona is or how slow Bibi appears to be, do not underestimate how dangerous hippos can be. Hippos have tremendous mass, incredible strength, and surprising speed. You have probably heard how dangerous hippos in the wild can be, and you must give the same respect to Fiona and Bibi.

Even if they did not intend to hurt you, watch the two of them playing together sometime. The way they swing their open mouths at each other, their heads weighing hundreds of pounds, they're like wrecking balls with tusks. And if you think you can outswim or even outrun one, think again. Respect the hippos.

Prior to opening the door to the exhibit and letting you out there, the DSO and the hippo keeper will lock out the hippo exhibit access door, and the DSO will hold the key until the dive is complete and everyone is off exhibit.

Like the Hippo building, Bear Line is a dangerous animal area, so be aware of your surroundings, stay at least arm's length from the bear dens, and pay attention to signs and instructions from the keepers. All the bear dens are on the same side of the tunnel, the exhibit side, so when you're walking down the tunnel, keep to the left. You must be aware of your surroundings at all times while in the tunnel. It's very easy to be talking with someone and not realize your back is too close to a bear den.

Years ago, an opossum crawled across the chain-link roof of one of the outdoor cat runs overnight. Unfortunately for the opossum, that run belonged to an ocelot. The next morning, the keepers found that the ocelot had pulled the opossum *through the chain-link* and eaten it. You know how big an opossum is, and you know how small the openings in chain-link fence are. So, if an ocelot can pull an opossum through chain-link, then a polar bear can pull you through the bars of the den door. So, stay frosty. And stay close to the DSO while on exhibit. They carry the bear mace.