

Ruthy's 25th Anniversary at Buttonwood Park Zoo



by Ali
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This September will officially mark the 25th Anniversary of Ruthy the elephant's arrival at Buttonwood Park Zoo, in New Bedford. In celebration of Ruth's quarter century at Buttonwood Park Zoo, New Bedford Guide is pleased and honored to provide an exclusive insight into her background.

Ruthy's story is that of triumphant recovery. Like many of the other animals at Buttonwood Park Zoo, Ruthy is a rescue animal. She is the survivor of a traveling menagerie in which she was horribly abused, and eventually abandoned. Without the rehabilitation and care given by the zoo, Ruthy may not have survived.

Ruthy, who is 52 years-old, is one of two female elephants who reside at Buttonwood Park Zoo. She shares her habitat with the other member of her herd named Emily, who is 47. Both Ruth and Emily are Asian elephants. Asian elephants are highly endangered. From National Geographic: "The elephant is Earth's largest land animal, although the Asian elephant is slightly smaller than its African cousin. Asian elephants can be identified by their smaller, rounded ears."

Upon seeing these beautiful creatures in their exhibit at the zoo, it is almost too hard to believe that Ruth's story is one that begins with hardship. The elephant you will encounter today is a sweet soul who truly enjoys the company of humans.

Since her arrival at the zoo in September of 1986, Ruthy has made a remarkable turnaround from the abused, frightened animal that she once was. This of course did not happen overnight, but with the care given by the staff and keepers at the zoo, the animal we see today is a testament to the care and compassion they provide.



Dr. Bill with
Ruthy

Buttonwood Park Zoo Director Dr. William Langbauer, or “Dr. Bill” as he’s known, provided New Bedford Guide with an exclusive insight into Ruthy’s history, her recovery, and her personality. Dr. Bill has been studying elephant behavior for the past 20+ years, even spending time working in Africa. The following contains excerpts from an interview with Dr. Bill:

“Ruthy’s story as we know it, begins when she was found 25 years ago, abandoned in a trailer by a trash dump in Danvers, MA. She was covered with sores, she was malnourished, and she had a partial paralysis in her trunk. She was totally neurotic; she would strike out at anybody who would come close to her. She was surrounded by dead and dying animals – it was an absolutely horrific experience.”

Ruthy’s life before discovery in the abandoned trailer was one of hardship. “Essentially she was part of a traveling

menagerie, where she suffered cruel treatment and abuse that has left her with a partially paralyzed trunk. The USDI (United States Department of the Interior) and the ARL Boston (Animal Rescue League in Boston) had intervened upon learning of the menagerie, confiscated the animals, and shut the menagerie down. Unfortunately, the success of this rescue was short lived, as the animals were all stolen back. After such an ordeal, denied rescue by recapture, Ruthy was abandoned, left for dead in an abandoned trailer for reasons unknown, although it most likely due to the partial immobility in her trunk she sustained from abuse as part of the menagerie.”

It is important to note that upon her discovery 25 years-ago, Ruthy was deemed unreleasable into the wild because of her condition. She has immobility in the mid-section of her trunk as a result from abuse and mistreatment during her days in the traveling menagerie. From National Geographic:

“An elephant’s trunk is actually a long nose with many functions. It is used for smelling, breathing, trumpeting, drinking, and also for grabbing things—especially a potential meal. The trunk alone contains about 100,000 different muscles. Asian elephants have a finger-like feature on the end of their trunk that they can use to grab small items.”



Ruthy

Miraculously for Ruthy, “someone noticed a trunk sticking out [of the trailer] and called the proper authorities. She was

brought to the zoo for what was supposed to be a temporary basis." However, Buttonwood Park Zoo went beyond the call of duty and made it their mission to rehabilitate this animal. "The keeper staff was beyond fantastic. They found out as much as they could about elephants and turned this animal who would kill you if you got close to it... to one where now she'll hold your hand. The transformation is as total as it could possibly be."

Buttonwood Park Zoo's Curator Shara Crook-Martin also graciously gave us her first-hand account of how Ruthy came to New Bedford. Shara remembers an "extremely skittish, nervous animal when she was brought in. I was actually here...that was back in '86. I was here when she first came in. I didn't work with her then but my recollection is of a very nervous, very scared animal. Over the years I really have been lucky to sort of see the transformation take place from a neurotic, scared animal to one that is extremely affectionate, a big ham. It's been an amazing journey for her really, and for the staff as well." Shara says, "She's an awesome animal to work with. She wants to please. That's a testimony to the care she's gotten while she's been here."



Emily, who shares the Buttonwood Park Zoo elephant habitat with Ruthy.

Ruthy's captivating life-tale exemplifies the beautiful connection possible between animals and humans. From Buttonwood Zoo's own Dr. William Langbauer: "We took an absolutely scared and neurotic animal, and now rather than [have a] fear of people, she associates them with kindness. That's the story."

To help celebrate Ruthy's triumphant recovery and a quarter century in New Bedford, tickets are available for the Buttonwood Park Zoo's Annual Fundraising Gala, a "Wild Night at the Zoo" on Saturday, July 23, 2011. Proceeds of the Gala directly benefit the educational and conservation mission of the Buttonwood Park Zoological Society – which is directly responsible for the care of Ruthy and the animals at the zoo.

From Buttonwood Park Zoo: "The mission of the Buttonwood Park Zoological Society is to support the Buttonwood Park Zoo so that the Zoo will be a significant contributor to the conservation of nature both at home and throughout the world. Accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums."

Special thanks to the Zoo's Director Dr. William Langbauer, Executive Director Sonia Schonning, Head-Zookeeper Bill Sampson, and Curator Shara Crook-Martin for providing such a detailed look into the life of Ruth.

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