



Alabama Gulf Coast  
**ZOO**

**THE HISTORY, PEOPLE & COMMUNITY OF THE LITTLE ZOO THAT GREW. SAFE AND SOUND.**

# history



The Little Zoo That Grew. **SAFE AND SOUND.**

HISTORY  
PEOPLE  
COMMUNITY



The Alabama Gulf Coast Zoo would simply not exist if it weren't for the Ward Family of Gulf Shores, Alabama. It was 1989 and local entrepreneur Joey Ward decided that the jungle-like parcel of land his family owned in the heart of town, a mile from the beach, was the perfect place to build a small, community zoo. With the help of his brother Stevie and childhood friend Rusty Gilbert, the zoo's facilities manager still to this day, Joey designed and constructed Zooland Animal Park. It became home to a collection of tropical birds, snakes, big cats and other exotic wildlife, run by a small staff of zookeepers. While Zooland was extremely popular with both locals and vacationers, Gulf Shores wasn't the tourist hot spot it is today, so attendance didn't generate quite enough funds to run the zoo year-round. But Joey and his parents, Wade and Pat Ward, were devoted custodians of the zoo's animals, and their financial support never wavered. In 1991, they formed a non-profit charitable organization, The Zoo Foundation, to operate the park, which it still does to this day, and the Wards continued their generosity and dedication to the zoo in the years that followed.

In 1995, Patti Hall walked through the gates of the zoo to become a volunteer, and the zoo's fate changed forever. Patti's professional credentials were in management, administration, education and public communications; it was impossible for her not to bring these skills and talents to the zoo. By 1997, Joey and the Zoo Board asked her to take over as Zoo Director. The following year, while running a zoo filled with hundreds of animals, Patti faced her first big challenge living on the Gulf Coast, with the arrival of Hurricane Georges. Quickly realizing that tropical storm season would become a new way of life, her dedication to the animals meant that their safety and security took precedence over everything else. Little did she know the true test she would face a few years later. In 1999, Patti hired Cyndi Johnson as Head Zookeeper who later went on to become the zoo's Curator.

In the meantime, Patti's primary job was to keep the zoo operational and open during tourist season. Her task was to make enough money during the spring and summer months to survive through Fall and Winter when it was the off-season. They had raffles, bake sales, even raided zoo vending machines to pay the bills - everything they could do to feed animals and stay operational. In 2000, Patti and the Board decided to rename the zoo in order to bring more professionalism and prestige to the organization, and the Alabama Gulf Coast Zoo was officially born.



As each busy tourist season rolled by, Patti began various zoo programs including, educational animal visits to schools and libraries, created community events and promotions aimed at tourists, turned "Boo in the Zoo" into a monster Halloween hit drawing over 2,500 annual attendees, made many improvements to animal exhibits, the gift shop, and the facility grounds...and by the summer of 2004, the zoo had its best season ever. Then, an unbelievable twist hit the Alabama Gulf Coast Zoo and turned its world upside down and inside out...

“  
**You couldn't make up a story with more unbelievable twists and turns than the history of the Alabama Gulf Coast Zoo.**

**Patti Hall  
Zoo Director**



The Alabama Gulf Coast Zoo is operated by The Zoo Foundation Inc., a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, and a 509(a)(2) charitable foundation under section 170, 2055, 2106 or 2522 of the Internal Revenue Code, and is governed by a board of directors. Steve Jones is the current Chairman of the Board.



# history



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## HISTORY PEOPLE COMMUNITY



On Monday, September 13, 2004, CBS news anchor Dan Rather announced that a deadly Category 3 hurricane named Ivan was heading toward the Alabama coast. Patti, her head zookeeper Cyndi Johnson, and the zoo's facilities manager Rusty Gilbert already knew what was coming and it was very bad. Gulf Shores would likely be the bullseye, and a mandatory evacuation had been ordered for thousands of residents. But what about hundreds of zoo animals? Patti knew they would not survive this monster storm if they were left behind, but nobody had ever evacuated an entire zoo before. That is until she decided the Alabama Gulf Coast Zoo would become the first one. Over a 36-hour period, Patti and her staff packed up over 265 animals and transported them 20 miles inland to her home and property where they, her staff's families, and their pets, all hunkered down to wait out Hurricane Ivan. The one animal they had to leave behind was the zoo's mascot, Chuckie, the 11-ft. 1,000 lb. American alligator who they hoped would survive in his swampy exhibit.



On September 16th, Hurricane Ivan made landfall. The Alabama Gulf Coast Zoo was completely destroyed and under 14 feet of water from the Gulf of Mexico. The towns of Gulf Shores and Orange Beach were also demolished.

In the aftermath back at Patti's house, there was no municipal power or running water, cell and telephone service was down, and they had a very limited supply of food and bottled water for the staff and the animals. They were completely dependent on a few small generators and cut off from any emergency services. The temperature and humidity were in the high 90's to add to the misery. In spite of everything, they had all survived the worst natural disaster to hit the Gulf Coast in 25 years. Yet, the animals of the Alabama Gulf Coast Zoo were now all homeless, and Patti's staff had no idea if their own homes were still standing, but not one animal life was lost in the transport or during the relocation, and no zookeeper had been injured. The bond between animals and keepers during this extraordinary undertaking was beyond description.

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**We had 28 people, 11 domestic dogs, 9 domestic cats, and 265 exotic animals in the backyard.**

Patti Hall, Zoo Director



“  
**It was the largest, full-scale, off-site evacuation of an American zoo on record.”**  
New York Times



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In the aftermath of Hurricane Ivan, word spread about Patti's historic rescue mission and for the zoo's desperate search for Chuckie, the alligator who had gone missing. The national media came calling. NatGeo, People magazine, The Weather Channel, CNN, Good Morning America, local TV and radio stations and countless newspapers reported on and interviewed Patti in the days that followed. Lifting their spirits, Chuckie was found safe and sound, and this little zoo became a big story.

But it was one particular appearance that started Patti and the zoo on another fateful journey no one would have ever believed possible. A few days after the evacuation, Peter Jennings of ABC World News featured Patti as his *Person of the Week*, "...and so we hail Patti Hall...shelter from the storm." It just so happened that Los Angeles documentary TV producer Julie Leifermann watched the segment and made some notes. Six months later in Spring 2005, she found Patti and her staff struggling to rebuild the zoo facility, but the animals were all there, happy and healthy.

**“We all knew what our purpose was, and that was to save those animals’ lives no matter what. They completely depended on me and my staff for their well-being and it was our duty to do whatever it took. In my mind, we are here to serve them first and foremost.”**

Patti Hall, Zoo Director  
Alabama Gulf Coast Zoo

-Peter Jennings "Person of the Week"  
Interview, September 24, 2004

Within weeks, a 13-episode TV series was developed and sold to Animal Planet and Leifermann's L.A. production company converged on Gulf Shores to tell this incredible story. They all endured two more evacuations for Hurricanes Dennis and Katrina, but Patti and her staff were determined, in spite of setbacks, to complete the rebuild and reopen the Alabama Gulf Coast Zoo.



On February 15, 2006, *The Little Zoo That Could* debuted on primetime TV and America fell in love with Patti Hall, her amazing zookeepers, and about 300 of the most charming zoo animals you could ever meet. Monetary donations poured in as viewers witnessed the inspiring dedication of Patti and her staff lovingly care for their animals while attempting a comeback of the zoo. Hope turned into triumph and the Alabama Gulf Coast Zoo was able to open its doors only 14 months after being completely destroyed. It became known as The Little Zoo, a "must-see" place on the map, and tourism came roaring back to the town of Gulf Shores and its neighboring communities still recovering from the hurricanes. By the end of 2006, the zoo had the most successful season in its history.



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**Ever since Katrina, I get a big pit in my stomach whenever a storm starts to form in the Gulf, worrying that it could turn into the hurricane that takes us out for good.**

Cyndi Johnson  
Head Zookeeper



Yet life was still precarious. June to November is hurricane season. The reconstructed zoo sitting atop swampland covered in sand on a barrier island wouldn't survive another powerful storm. It was a ticking time bomb. The only long-term solution was to move to safer terrain and build a new zoo. An impossibly expensive, complicated dream.

But thanks to another Gulf Shores family, this wasn't going to be a far-fetched dream. Animal-lovers Clyde Weir and his daughter Andrea were deeply touched by *The Little Zoo* TV series and wanted to help in a big way. They stunned Patti with a gift to the zoo of 25 acres of prime Gulf Shores real estate located four miles off the island. However, designing and building a new multi-million dollar facility was a complicated endeavor, and over the ensuing years, the enormous resources and commitments required by a non-profit zoo, made it very difficult. By 2008, The Great Recession added to this challenge. Then the worse man-made disaster to hit the Gulf, the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill in 2010, put Patti's dream zoo into a deep freeze. The beach communities of Alabama took a devastating hit from the spill, as did their tourism business. Fundraising for a new zoo came to a grinding halt.

Coping with yet another disaster, Patti was determined to keep the Alabama Gulf Coast Zoo viable. She made improvements, trained new staff, and added new educational animal encounters and stage shows. Her idea was that during hard times, people needed some joy to lift their spirits; an escape that was a good value for their money; a safe, kid-friendly place that felt like a happy family. A charming little zoo

filled with hundreds of adorable animals was just the ticket... as long as a hurricane didn't show up.

In a brilliant attempt to raise awareness about the environmental impact the oil spill had on wildlife, the new zoo team developed a design concept that would place the Alabama Gulf Coast Zoo at the forefront of conservation and sustainability as a fully operational green zoo. But again, their efforts to raise enough capital were hampered by slow economic recovery. This ambitious plan was not to be.

As they always did under Patti's leadership, they re-grouped and continued to build on the current zoo's success. An important alliance was made with renowned animal expert Jim Fowler who then assisted Patti with a more feasible design path for the new zoo.

In another amazing twist of fate, the same person who built the original zoo, Zooland Animal Park, is now building The New Alabama Gulf Coast Zoo. Joey Ward met Jim Fowler and that was that...27 years later, Wade and Pat Ward have financially jumpstarted another zoo; brother Stevie and childhood friend Rusty Gilbert are back on Joey's team; and Patti Hall is now living her dream. Circle of life, indeed.





# people

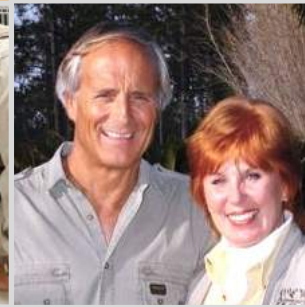


“ I love being able to share my passion and knowledge about animals with children. It’s one of the best things about my job.   
 Patti Hall, Zoo Director



## The Little Zoo That Grew. SAFE AND SOUND.

# HISTORY PEOPLE COMMUNITY



### DIRECTOR, ALABAMA GULF COAST ZOO

Ringleader, mentor, mother, task-master, mountain-mover, and most of all, motivator...If the animals are the soul of the Alabama Gulf Coast Zoo... then **Patti Hall** is its heart.

Everyone, from zoo visitors to TV viewers, employees, even the press, love Miz Patti, her humor and her warmth. However, Miz Patti does not love everyone - not if they stand in the way of caring for her beloved zoo animals. But she is a proper Southern woman who doesn't yell or treat people disrespectfully; she charms to get things done. And these days, her full plate calls upon every ounce of charisma to maintain stability at the current zoo, get them all through another hurricane season, and attend to the enormity of building a new zoo - the first in the US to be constructed from the ground up in over 20 years.

Patti delights in knowing that the New Alabama Gulf Coast Zoo will be the future safety and security her animals deserve, and a lasting "footprint" she can leave behind for her community while continuing to educate generations of children about the importance of animal welfare and conservation.

### PATTI HALL | PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Patti Hall's extensive background in management, education and public speaking has contributed to the success of her current endeavors as Director of the Alabama Gulf Coast Zoo. After college, Patti was appointed Director, Montessori of Kentucky Herr Lane Academy in Louisville. Five years later, she assisted in spearheading an innovative pilot project funded under the Older Americans Act. During her eight years, four centers throughout Louisville provided many public services to over 60,000 seniors, and 45 years later, the program is still going strong. Patti also spent 16 years in publishing, holding key management positions with the American Cities Business Group, and as General Manager for American International Publishing Inc., publisher of *International Business* magazine, in Rye, New York.

Patti's professional zoo experience was inspired early on by her childhood affinity with animals and time spent at the Louisville Zoo while she was a college art student. Years later, after resettling in the Gulf Shores area, her love of zoos led her to the Alabama Gulf Coast Zoo. In 1995 she became a volunteer, then two years later, was appointed Zoo Director. Patti's goals: to turn a small, financially struggling, roadside zoo into a facility that placed animal care as its highest priority; offered a safe, family attraction that emphasized animal conservation education in an intimate, charming environment; and made fundraising, community outreach, and publicity integral to turning the zoo's fortunes around. Within a few years, Patti was well on her way to achieving every one of those goals when disaster struck the zoo.

In 2004, Hurricane Ivan hit the Gulf Coast. But before it destroyed the town of Gulf Shores and the zoo, Patti and her staff made history becoming the first US zoo to perform a full-scale, off-site, total evacuation during a natural disaster. Over 265 animals were transported to Patti's home where they stayed for weeks while make-shift repairs were underway at the zoo. This courageous feat made global headlines, led to the hit TV series, *The Little Zoo That Could* on Animal Planet, and began Patti's journey to the creation of a new zoo in a safer location. Obviously, the Alabama Gulf Coast Zoo's tremendous success today is a testament to Patti's professional experience, extraordinary skills, and dedication. Patti's first set of goals as Zoo Director have been achieved even beyond her wildest dreams, and now her next set of goals are even bigger...

### PATTI HALL | NATIONAL PRESS & PUBLICITY

- *Person of the Week*, Peter Jennings ABC World Nightly News
- National Geographic
- PEOPLE magazine
- The Weather Channel's *Animal Storm Stories*
- The Late, Late Show with Craig Ferguson
- CNN News
- Good Morning America
- BBC World News
- Entertainment Weekly
- Los Angeles Times
- New York Times
- Washington Post
- Newsweek
- Chicago Tribune
- Associated Press

### PATTI HALL | AWARDS & ACHIEVEMENTS

- 2006 Alabama Dept. of Tourism *Director's Award*
- *Patti Hall Day Proclamation* October 23, 2006 Reading, Ohio
- 2015 Alabama "34 Women Who Shape the State"

### PATTI'S FIRST PET

At age 6, Sparky the parakeet



# people



“Moving to this new zoo will feel like we went up a hill and came down a mountain.”  
Joey Ward, Original Zoo Founder | New Zoo Project Leader



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## JOEY WARD | Project Lead

Joey Ward came into this world already facing a daunting family legacy. His great uncle George Meyer, considered one of the founders of Gulf Shores, responsible for much of its coastal and urban development, left his nephew Wade Ward, Joey's father, with a charitable foundation in which these good works were to continue. Joey grew up knowing that he and his siblings would need to carry the torch in helping Gulf Shores thrive as a community. So Joey pursued real estate, tourism, and business development focused on family entertainment that fostered his many entrepreneurial interests and kept him connected to his passion for the outdoors. "As a kid, my brother and I planted 90% of the trees you see today in Gulf Shores," says Joey. "I have always felt a special kinship with the land, nature, and wildlife." So it was no surprise when this enterprising young man wanted to build a zoo on the edge of a swamp in the middle of town. With family support, Zooland Animal Park came into being, later becoming the Alabama Gulf Coast Zoo, and the rest is history. But now the future beckons to Joey and the *Little Zoo*. Almost 30 years later, still fiercely committed to his community, he also brings an impressive resume of successful business endeavors to this latest adventure - The New Alabama Gulf Coast Zoo - bigger, bolder, safe and sound, and still in the heart of Gulf Shores.

## WADE & PAT WARD | Zoo Founders

While they would never consider themselves worthy of the word *legendary*, the Ward family has not just been integral to the creation, survival and success of the Alabama Gulf Coast Zoo, but to the town of Gulf Shores. From the time they moved to this community in the 1960s, their commitment, generosity and imprint as civic leaders and patrons to the arts, education, public works and land conservation has been boundless. Through the legacy of the George C. Meyer Foundation, Wade Ward's uncle, and through Wade and Pat's personal philanthropy, thousands of acres of land have been donated for beaches, parks, nature preserves, recreation, and municipal development. The staggering list of public projects include: the donation of land, funds or the building of many community churches of various denominations, The City of Gulf Shores city hall complex, the civic center, performing arts center, recreation center, public golf course, public boat ramps, tennis center, education institutions, and many historic and beautification installations. Add on Wade's business acumen as a real estate developer and Ms. Pat's social and humanitarian causes, and they have instilled in their four children a deep sense of civic and moral responsibility, an entrepreneurial spirit, dedication to their family, faith and community, and an abiding compassion to help others in need, which has always included the animals of the Alabama Gulf Coast Zoo - past, present, and most certainly, in the future.

“I don't know of anything that we could have done for the community that would have been better than this.”

## CLYDE & ANDREA WEIR | New Zoo Patrons

Long-time resident Clyde Weir's mother opened a small souvenir shop in Gulf Shores in 1947 right across the highway from the beach and called it Souvenir City. As Gulf Shores grew into a popular tourist town so did this family run business which Clyde eventually turned into a 30,000 sq. foot mega-store and landmark known for its giant shark front entrance. Clyde continued in his entrepreneurial ventures over the years which led to financial success in commercial development also benefitting the community of Gulf Shores. But there is no more grateful a beneficiary than the Alabama Gulf Coast Zoo. After seeing the devastation to the zoo wrought by Hurricane Ivan, devoted animal-lovers Clyde and his daughter Andrea wanted to make a meaningful difference in the zoo's long-term survival. So they donated 25 acres of prime real estate, part of Andrea's inheritance, for the future location of a new zoo. Four miles inland on elevated, flood-proof terrain, the Alabama Gulf Coast Zoo will finally be safe and sound, thanks to the Weir's generosity.



# people



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## KEY ALABAMA GULF COAST ZOO STAFF

### **CYNDI JOHNSON | Head Zookeeper | Curator**

Born in Southern California, Cyndi Johnson arrived in Gulf Shores at age 7 and never left. Driven by a deep passion to work with animals, her first job was in a veterinary clinic as a vet tech. She then worked in a pet store, bought her own pet store, and later became a zookeeper at Zooland Animal Park in 1995 where she met new volunteer Patti Hall. After a year, Cyndi left the zoo to start a family, but knew she would be back. In 1999 Cyndi was re-hired by the new Zoo Director Patti Hall, and by 2001, she was made Head Zookeeper. Cyndi immersed herself into the professional zoo world, attending conferences, visiting other zoos, researching and reading the latest publications, joining professional zoo organizations, and furthering her education. She and Patti were determined to reach their goals: to improve the quality of life for the animals, from diet to enrichment; meet the highest professional standards in zookeeping; enhance the visitor experience, and engage the community in the zoo's long-term well-being. Hurricane Ivan was a watershed moment for everyone involved, but it never once deterred Cyndi from her abiding commitment to the zoo's animals. The new zoo means keeping her animals safe and sound, and being able to educate the public about the precious, vital role animals play in our natural world.

### **KIM DAHLGREN | General Manager**

After seeing the first episode of *The Little Zoo That Could* on Animal Planet in 2006, Kim Dahlgren began volunteering part-time at the Alabama Gulf Coast Zoo and never left. By 2013, this animal-lover became the General Manager and now, her number-crunching expertise and administrative skills include lemur counting and other such delightful zoo duties. A trusted ally of Patti's and a fervent champion of the new zoo, she'd count sand fleas if it could help get it built any faster.

### **RUSTY GILBERT | Facilities Manager**

Rusty Gilbert, born and raised in Gulf Shores, helped his childhood friend, Joey Ward, construct the original Zooland Animal Park, and has been with the zoo ever since...

“ I just love animals. I'd rather be around animals than people sometimes.

Rusty has always felt a true communion with animals, and the bond he has with those at the Alabama Gulf Coast Zoo is unbreakable. One in particular is an American Black bear named Boodah who was the size of a football when Rusty began hand-raising him, and is now a strapping 400-pounder. For most of Rusty's adult life, he's worked at this little zoo. He's been through all the ups and downs; seen it fall to the ground and hammered it back up again, and can't imagine being anywhere else.

## THE ZOO FOUNDATION, INC.

### **STEVE JONES | Chairman, Board of Directors**

There is no one more involved in his community than Steve Jones. Since moving to Gulf Shores in the early 1990s to work in hospitality and tourism management, he has also held positions on the Alabama Gulf Coast Chamber of Commerce, the Convention & Visitors Bureau, the Kiwanis Club, Advisory Committees for the public library, parks and recreation, police, fire, emergency services, and coastal planning. He's been on the City of Gulf Shores City Council since 2000, is one of the top realtors in town, known for his stunning scenic photography, and plays the harmonica. But from the moment he became a volunteer at Zooland Animal Park in 1995, this little zoo captured his heart, only deepening his commitment year after year. Through feast or famine, evacuations and hurricanes, the national TV spotlight, rebuilding, and now building anew, Steve has been a vital part of the zoo's history, its present endeavors as a successful enterprise, and a driving force behind its rebirth into the future. A member of the Zoo Board of Directors for over 12 years, he is a Chairman who has proudly worn a Cowardly Lion costume to several Boo in the Zoo annual fundraisers. His favorite animal is Clue the Peacock, Mayor of the Alabama Gulf Coast Zoo.





# community



community | kə'myōōnitē

noun

a feeling of fellowship with others, as a result of sharing common attitudes, interests, and goals



SMALL TOWN

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HISTORY  
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BIG BEACH



**“Gulf Shores is a very unique place. In the aftermath of devastating natural and man-made disasters, we have maintained a strong sense of community - neighbors helping neighbors - to always come back stronger. And while hundreds of thousands of visitors enjoy our world-class beaches every year, we’ve also retained our small town values.**

**Mayor Robert Craft**  
Gulf Shores, AL

[www.gulfshoresal.gov](http://www.gulfshoresal.gov)

The silky, white-sand beaches of the Alabama Gulf Coast are some of the most beautiful in the world. Lining Alabama’s southern border to the Gulf of Mexico, the adjacent communities of Gulf Shores and Orange Beach have endured their share of ups and downs over the decades. And now they bask in an era of hard-fought stability and growth, their futures both about to be imbued by the sparkle of the New Alabama Gulf Coast Zoo.

Gulf Shores has been the zoo’s home since 1989 and will happily remain so when the zoo moves to its new location in 2018. This steadfast community is also home to the zoo’s founders, its benefactors, its supporters, its loyal army of volunteers, and to the many longtime family businesses that leaned in during their darkest days together. Hurricanes Ivan and Katrina, the Great Recession, and Deepwater Horizon proved everyone’s mettle.

When the tides of good fortune finally arrived for the zoo, it did for its community as well. After Zoo Director Patti Hall and her staff were recognized as heroes for their historic hurricane evacuation, they became TV stars on the Animal Planet series, *The Little Zoo That Could*. The Alabama Gulf Coast Zoo’s newfound fame and prosperity brought a renewed spirit to Gulf Shores...and its neighbors.

Orange Beach. Like the best friend next door, this other Alabama small town with a beautiful, big beach has stood beside Gulf Shores through every disaster over the years and offered up whatever support it could muster. Its people feel a deep kinship to the Alabama Gulf Coast Zoo and play an important part in its future success. They are cheerleaders with skin in the game.

Together, two small towns and a little zoo couldn’t better define the true meaning of the word “community.”



Population (2010 Census)  
Gulf Shores, AL: 9,741  
Orange Beach, AL: 5,441



**“We’re more than “community” down here, we're family. We look out for each other.”**

**Mayor Tony Kennon**  
Orange Beach, AL

[www.cityoforangebeach.com](http://www.cityoforangebeach.com)