



WILD THING

Jack Hanna will bring a menagerie to the Mendel Center on Friday

By **JEREMY D. BONFIGLIO**
HP Features Writer

BENTON HARBOR — Jack Hanna scoffs at the notion that he is a television celebrity. “The animals are the stars,” Hanna says by telephone from his office at the Columbus Zoo. “I’m just the same old person I was growing up on the farm. I’m still available to everybody. I don’t have an agent or a manager or anything like that. I’m just Jack.”

It’s that same everyman mentality coupled with Hanna’s Southern charm and ever-present khaki safari hat that has made the zookeeper — affectionately known as “Jungle Jack” — the king of TV’s animal kingdom. Since 1983, after his first appearance on “Good Morning America,” Hanna has become the go-to animal expert on programs ranging from “Late Show With David Letterman” to “Larry King Live.” He’s hosted his own nationally syndicated television series, “Jack Hanna’s Animal Adventures,” since 1993; added the Emmy-winning unscripted family series “Jack Hanna’s Into the Wild” in 2007; and his latest series, “Jack Hanna’s Wild Countdown,” has started airing Saturday mornings on ABC.

“We just filmed in Curaçao and Gabon in West Africa,” Hanna says. “Not many people know that Gabon has some of the most incredible animals in the world. We filmed the lowland gorillas who live in the Congo. We filmed the forest elephant, which is a very rare animal. We filmed sea turtles nesting on the beach. About two weeks ago we were filming in Kenya, Rwanda and Greece, so we’re constantly on the move.”

Friday’s destination is Benton Harbor for “Jack Hanna’s Into the Wild Live” at Lake Michigan College’s Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre. Hanna’s live appearance includes an in-person look at many different animals interspersed with footage and stories from some of his world-wide adventures.

“I relate through clips what my experiences are with animals all over the world,” Hanna says. “And of course there will be some live animals. I’ll be bringing a cheetah, a snow leopard, a penguin, a 12-foot snake. I’ve got some birds and all kinds of things I’m bringing. I can bring some really neat animals up there because you’re so close.”

Born in Knoxville, Tenn., and raised on his father’s family farm just outside the city, Hanna’s

Zookeeper and animal expert “Jungle” Jack Hanna and his show “Jack Hanna’s Into the Wild Live” come to Benton Harbor on Friday at Lake Michigan College’s Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre.
Photo provided

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lifetime work with animals began by volunteering for the family veterinarian at age 11.

"Dr. Roberts, our veterinarian, let me clean cages," Hanna says. "I asked him if I could clean cages. He thought I'd last a day, but I lasted five years. Every summer I'd clean cages. Then when I was 15 I went and visited the Knoxville Zoo and I said that someday I'd be a zookeeper and I never wavered from that dream."

He graduated from Muskingum College in New Concord, Ohio, where he met and married Suzi Egli. The couple opened a pet shop, Pet Kingdom, in Knoxville, Tenn. In 1973, Hanna received an offer to direct a small zoo in

IF YOU GO

What: "Jack Hanna's Into the Wild Live"

When: 7:30 p.m. Friday

Where: Lake Michigan College Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre, 2755 E. Napier Ave., Benton Harbor

How much: \$28-\$38

Contact: 927-1221 or www.lmcmainstage.org

Artist info: www.jackhanna.com

Sanford, Fla., and jumped at the opportunity. He landed in Columbus five years later after answering an ad for a director at the struggling Columbus Zoo. At the time, attendance was low and the animals were in outdated cage-like enclosures rather than habitat

environments. Hanna started to change that by focusing on education and gaining public support.

"I've always said this and sometimes I've taken a little heat for it, but the No. 1 goal of a zoological park is education," Hanna says. "You know we have the animals, we know conservation is important. That's why they are there. But you can not have conservation unless you have education. You have to teach people. We have a saying – touch the heart to teach the mind. You touch the heart by having the animals and the natural habitats, by having it be a fun place to go. By the time they've left they've learned something. That's how you touch the mind. It's that simple."

To increase the profile of the zoo, Hanna hosted a local television program, "Hanna's Ark," which aired

for three years on the local Columbus CBS affiliate WBNS. In 1983, following the birth of baby twin gorillas at the Columbus Zoo, Hanna was invited to appear on "Good Morning America" in New York. Two years later, Letterman invited Hanna to appear on his show. The two hit it off, and Hanna has been making multiple appearances on both shows – along with a slew of others – ever since.

"David Letterman is a very private person, but he's a very giving person and people don't know about that," Hanna says. "When I come on his show I know people want to laugh, but he never makes fun of the animals. He knows he can tear me apart and I can throw it right back at him. The exposure it brings to the animal world, well, you can't buy it."

That exposure largely helped the Columbus Zoo's remarkable turnaround. During Hanna's tenure as director, the zoo created state-of-the-art to habitat environments for its animals, and both the grounds and attendance significantly expanded.

"The Columbus Zoo was third from the bottom in the country and now we're one of the top zoos in the entire United States," Hanna says. "We have over 600 acres and annual attendance of 2.4 million people. When I first went there attendance was not even 200,000. We have added a place called The Wilds, which is 10,000 acres about an hour-and-a-half from Columbus and the largest conservation area in the United States. We have four generations of white rhino there, the largest heard of Sichuan Takin

with 47 animals. We have the Mongolian horse, which is extinct in the wild. We have 62 projects around the world in 40 countries. It goes on and on and on."

Hanna stopped managing the day-to-day operations at the Columbus Zoo in 1992 to become its director emeritus, a job that allows him to continue to do what he does best while maintaining a rigid travel and TV schedule as an animal ambassador.

"My dad always said that he didn't care what I wanted to be, he just wanted me to remember three words – hard work and enthusiasm," Hanna says. "If you love what you do you're going to work hard for it. I don't care what it is. That's why I tell young people to follow their dream. It worked for me."

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