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February 24, 2023

Living the Chimp Life

A day with the fascinating chimpanzees living out their second act at Save the Chimps sanctuary in Fort Pierce

By **Michelle Lee Ribeiro**
February 24, 2023

On a serene 150 acres in Fort Pierce, there's an entire subcolony of residents hiding in plain sight. They spend their days much like we do: snacking, napping, engaging in hobbies (called "enrichment activities"), and hanging out with their friends. Their world is quite full and active, though most humans aren't even aware these Treasure Coast locals are living nearby. The community here has one rule to becoming a member resident: You must be a chimpanzee.

Currently, 227 chimps live here at [Save the Chimps](#) sanctuary, where they are free to roam about and just be, well, chimps. They live in family groups on 12 separate islands within the property, each home separated by reeds and waterways to give the groups some privacy. On a recent visit, the members of one clan were playful, chasing each other around and climbing on their wooden structures, while those in another family were lazily having a snooze.

Save the Chimps was cofounded in 1997 by anthropologist Carole Noon, a graduate of FAU and the University of Florida who sued the U.S. Air Force to gain custody of 21 chimps who had endured harsh conditions in the name of research. Along with Jon Stryker of the Arcus Foundation (who is currently board chair of Save the Chimps; Noon passed away in 2009), she purchased the Fort Pierce land, built a sanctuary, and moved the chimpanzees in.

Since then, the nonprofit has taken in more than 330 animals who were facing exploitation and endangerment. Some have come from the entertainment industry; others were freed from research labs—like the 266 chimps who were transferred to Save the Chimps by the Coulston Foundation over the course of a

decade. Coulston was a biomedical research lab in New Mexico that had violated the Animal Welfare Act and was going bankrupt. Save the Chimps stepped in and, by 2011, had moved every single chimp to Fort Pierce.

At the sanctuary, these animals are experiencing a life they had been denied for years, if not their entire lives. They are able to roam free, live in groups, and be the social creatures they were born to be. Supported by 50 caregivers, 45 volunteers, and a seven-member medical team, they have climbing structures to play on, lush environs to explore, and enrichment activities like painting and food foraging challenges to keep them mentally stimulated. They receive lifelong, comprehensive medical care (the average life span of a chimp is 40-60 years) and are fed a nutritious and delicious diet. Aside from chimp staples like bananas, oranges, and corn, they are treated to special meals like their favorite stuffed peppers prepared by the onsite chef, commissary supervisor Josh Henderson.

Like humans, chimpanzees can be choosy when it comes to friends. So when a new chimp arrives at the sanctuary, it meets with leaders of the 12 different clans so staff members can gauge how well they get along and situate them accordingly. For those who have trouble vibing with other chimps, or have a medical condition that requires some social distance from the healthier animals, there is a special needs facility and a "time share" island, where they can reside with pals in a similar situation.

On these pages, we offer a peek inside the lives of these incredible animals. If you're inspired by their stories and would like to help support their care, you can "adopt" a chimp (for as little as \$60 a year) or donate any amount you are able via the website.

Tammy, Melody, and Janice hang out on their family's wooden climbing structure. Tammy, 39, was born at Holloman Air Force Base in New Mexico, where her parents had been living in captivity since the 1960s for use in space research. After almost two decades spent as a research animal, she arrived at

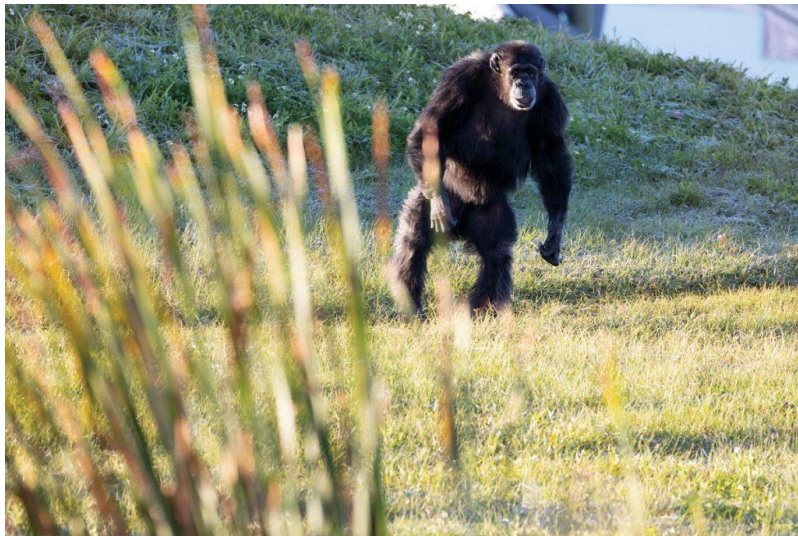
Save the Chimps in 2001. She is a bit silly and full of energy and likes to eat mixed nuts and dried fruit. Melody, 15, was actually born at the sanctuary, the result of her dad's failed vasectomy. Luckily, she has never had to endure the suffering of isolation or medical experimentation. She loves to play with toys and do enrichment activities involving peanut butter. Janice, 24, was born at the Coulston Foundation and endured years of experiments at their lab, then at a lab in Maryland, and at yet another lab in Louisiana. After a long battle, Save the Chimps finally gained custody of her in 2007, when Janice was 8. She is very intelligent, and one of her favorite hobbies is spreading colorful paint on canvases, floors, and walls.



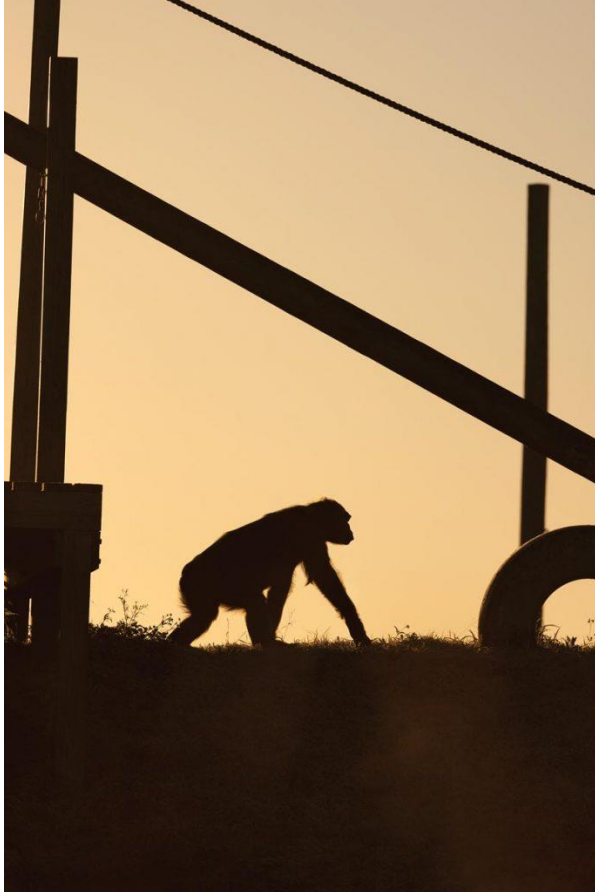
Photography by Mark Cook



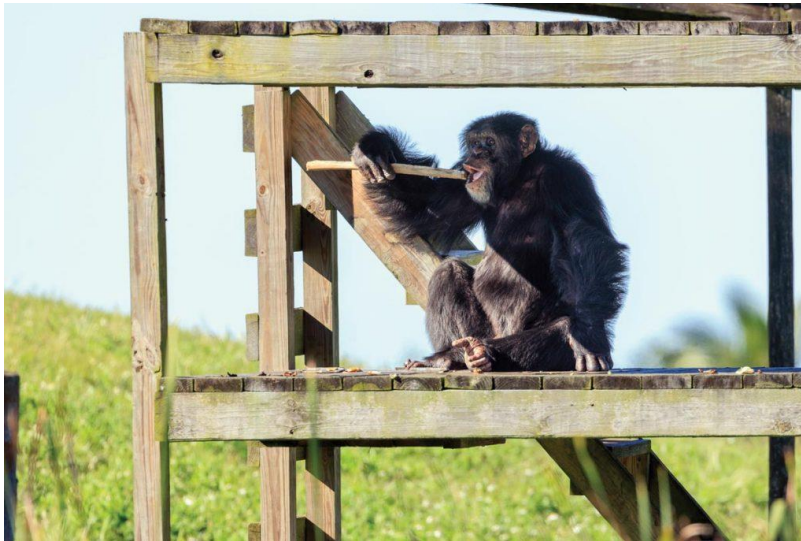
Lisa Marie, 16, was forced to work in the entertainment industry in Chicago for the first eight years of her life before arriving in Fort Pierce in 2015. She is quite the character who loves drawing with crayons, putting stickers all over her body, and dressing up in tutus!



Angel, 37, was born in a research lab and used in studies starting at just 17 months old. Rescued in 2002, she loves being outside and getting tickled by staff with a "tickle stick."



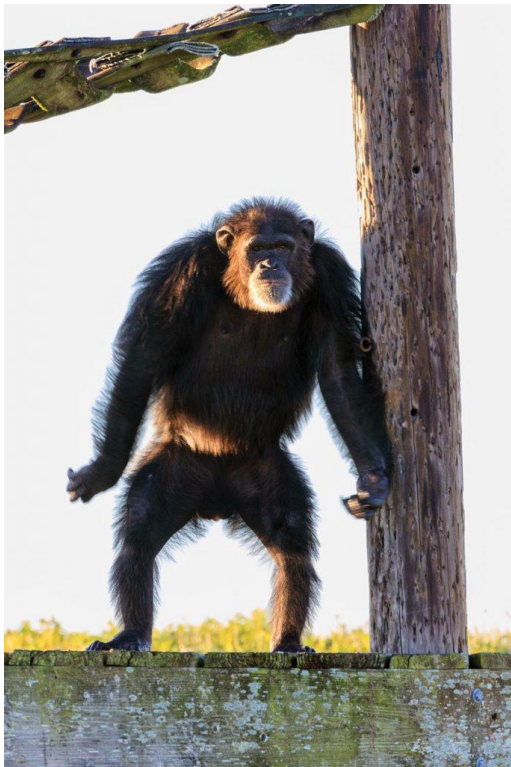
Belinda, 29, was born at the Coulston Foundation, where she spent seven years living in a small cage. She came to Save the Chimps in 2002. She likes to make tools from things she finds around the island and was described by Carole Noon as a "genius."



Apollo, 24, was taken from his mother at Coulston just 12 hours after birth. In 2011, he came to the sanctuary, where he was reunited with his mom. The self-appointed official greeter, Apollo is the first to welcome visitors with a smile.

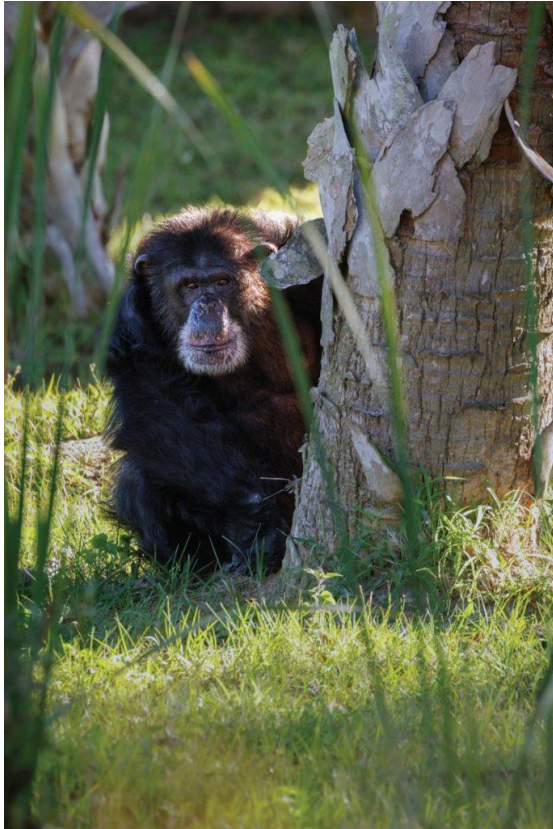


Ricky, 40, is believed to have spent a decade as a circus chimp, being castrated and de-teethed along the way. He then entered the pet trade and was living in captivity as a “pet” in a private garage. Rescued in 2017, he now enjoys painting, lounging in hammocks, and snoozing with cozy shirts used as blankets.

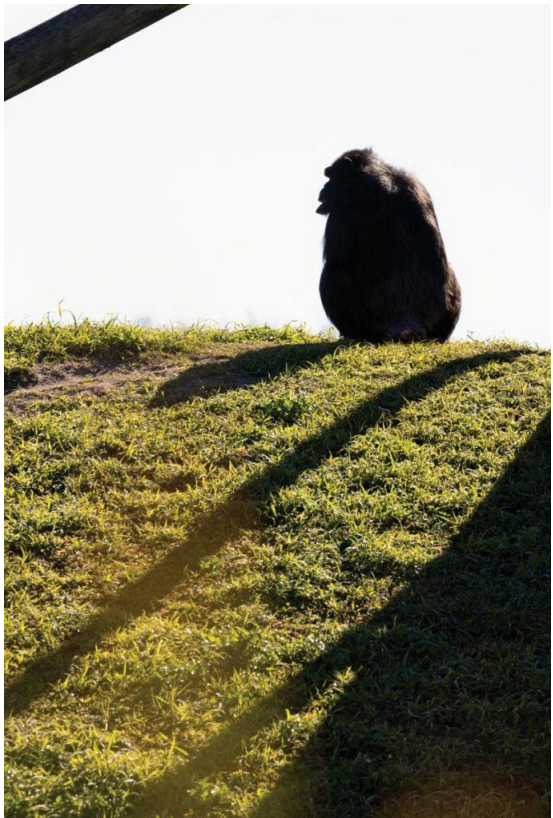


Ryan, 35, was born at Holloman Air Force Base in New Mexico and was sent to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta just before his second birthday. There, he was injected with the hepatitis A virus as the subject of numerous medical studies and had part of his liver removed. He did not see the outdoors for 14 years, became depressed, and was self-harming. By the time he was rescued by Save the Chimps in 2003, he was extremely traumatized, and rehabilitation took five years (he didn’t even know how to do normal “chimp things” like climb when he first arrived). Today, Ryan is confident, social, and loves painting,

exploring and climbing!



Spike, 32, came to the sanctuary in 2002 after spending the first 12 years of his life used as a research chimp at Coulston. Highly respected by his peers, he is a mentor to new residents and a great mediator when disagreements arise. For fun, he likes to play tug-of-war and swing from anything he can find.



Comet, 28, was taken from her parents just two days after birth and raised in the Coulston laboratory. When she was 3, she was shipped off to another lab in Maryland, then ended up in a lab at the CDC in Atlanta. After a long, arduous road, Comet finally made it to Fort Pierce in 2006, where she gets to be with other chimps for the very first time. She is very playful and loves to hide around the island with her pals. Favorite foods include leeks and strawberries.

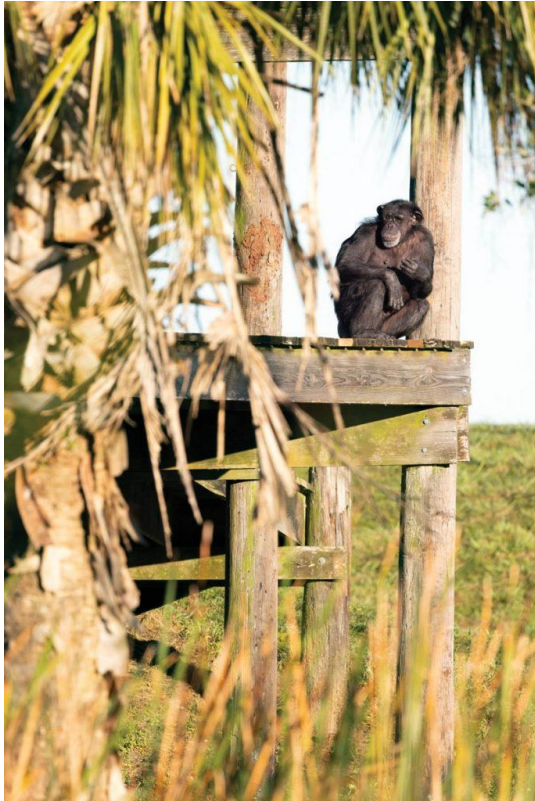


Wade, 23, spent the first three years of his life in a research lab before coming to Save the Chimps in 2002, where he loves to stroll around and explore nature. He is finicky about food and won't eat bananas if there are any spots on the peel! He also loves shoes and always notices when

a caregiver gets a new pair of boots—then takes the old pair and walks around with them on his back.



Kioki, 24, was used in medical research at Coulston for four years before being rescued by Save the Chimps in 2002. He's a rowdy one, playfully banging on windows and throwing toys around. He loves his chimp friends and is a top-ranked member of his family.



Kohei, 35, came to the sanctuary in 2002 after spending the first 15 years of her life as a research chimp at Coulston. Sahe loves food more than almost anything and will move her pals out of the way to get first dibs on a meal. Kohei is a bit of a loner who prefers to spend time in her house, casually observing and relaxing.

3 Days to Visit

The sanctuary only opens to the public for a handful of special events each year. Mark these dates in your calendar for a rare opportunity to meet the chimps.

April 1, 2023: Member Day

Tour the sanctuary by foot or tram and observe the chimps as they roam their islands, swing from climbing structures, and bask in the sun. Bring binoculars and comfortable shoes (water provided). Walking tours cover 1.25 miles, so choose the tram tour if you tire easily. Member day is open to nonmembers if space is available (\$55).

December 2, 2023: Holiday with the Chimps

Join the chimps' holiday party and watch as they open presents, feast, and serenade each other around a festive tree. After the tour, a primatologist and staff members will lead discussions about chimp communication, care, and conservation. Open to nonmembers only if space is available; tickets are limited (\$60 adults/\$40 kids).

February 2024 (date TBD): Chimpathon

The annual 5K/10K takes runners around the sanctuary as the resident chimps cheer them on (\$50/\$60).

**Click [here](#) for registration info.*