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Virginia Zoo has new paths to fitness — program blends exercise with seeing the animals

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On the Virginia Zoo's longest path for its new fitness program, guests can overlook the siamang exhibit from beside a waterfall. Zoo Tracks has six routes patrons can choose from to increase their step counts.



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On the path called Zip Around the Zoo, an orangutan gazes at onlookers from its enclosure.



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Two tigers play in the water along the zoo's longest path, Zip Around the Zoo.



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Walkers will pass through gardens on the longest path featured in Zoo Tracks.



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Alpacas watch passersby while zoo volunteer Sue Barton cleans their enclosure.

A trip to the zoo can be educational.

And "it's obviously fun," said Ashley Mars.

But zoos can serve another purpose: "Exercise," said Mars, the Virginia Zoo's marketing manager.

The zoo and the YMCA of South Hampton Roads have launched a walking program. Zoo Tracks is for all ages and fitness levels, and provides patrons with six themed paths intended to increase their step counts. Visitors have to pay zoo admission, but the fitness is free.

"Take a walk in your neighborhood and enjoy the scenery you see every day, or take a walk at the zoo and see things you wouldn't normally see, like giraffes," said Gina Adrover, a health and wellness director for the Blocker Norfolk Family YMCA and the Y on Granby.

"It's neat to walk around with your family and friends and see exotic animals."

The walking program was inspired by similar efforts at other zoos around the country, Mars said. It was a good fit for Norfolk, because the zoo shares "the city's mission to have a healthy lifestyle," she said. "(So) we asked (the Y) to chat about the possibilities."

Adrover and her supervisor, Daniel O'Connor, studied the zoo's map. Then, they visited the zoo and used an iPhone app to track their steps along six different paths.

"He's much taller than I am, (so) we took the average of our strides," said Adrover, who helped name all the paths.

The longest route, which takes about 2,540 steps, is called Zip Around the Zoo. The shortest, called Tiger Trek, is about 900 steps. Participants, called "zoo walkers," can find the paths on the Virginia Zoo smart phone app, or on paper maps available at the zoo's membership office. At 10 a.m. on the first Monday of each month through August, visitors can follow the paths with a YMCA guide.

The guided walks will feature a talk about a health-related topic, plus periodic stops for other exercise. What you'll see at the zoo depends on what path you pick.

"You're going to see something different every time," Mars said.

And in the process, Adrover said, you'll burn a lot of calories.

"You will be surprised by how many steps you take when you walk around the zoo," Mars said.

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