

2026 Zoo Crew Lead Naturalist Position Description

GENERAL SUMMARY

The Zoo Crew Lead Naturalist is an unpaid leadership position in support of the overall Zoo Crew Program that is responsible for assisting and mentoring the Naturalist portion of Zoo Crew. Lead Naturalists help strengthen storytelling and interpretive skills among fellow Teen Naturalists in a positive and encouraging manner and mentor new and returning Zoo Crew Naturalists. This role focuses on empowering their peers to deliver engaging, meaningful experiences that inspire Zoo guests to care about and take action for wildlife.

The Lead Naturalist will have the opportunity to hone their interpretation skills and build leadership skills as they take an active role on our Leadership Council and provide insight into how we can improve the Zoo Crew program. This role requires a high level of energy and enthusiasm, creativity, flexibility, and the ability to work with groups of your peers. By strengthening the interpretive skills of Teen Naturalists, this role will help create memorable guest experiences that spark curiosity, empathy, and action for wildlife conservation.

Key Responsibilities:

Ideal Candidate:

- Enthusiastic about wildlife conservation and passionate about inspiring others to make a difference.
- Strong communicator with an interest in storytelling and creative expression.
- Comfortable leading peers and facilitating group activities.
- Reliable, collaborative, and eager to learn and grow as a leader.

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The Zoo Crew Lead Naturalist is a leadership position within the Zoo Crew program. Responsibilities include:

- Serving as a member of the leadership council and participating in meetings and activities to prepare for the summer program
- Providing constructive feedback and guidance to help teens improve their communication skills.
- Creating and facilitating morning practice sessions focused on storytelling strategies and conservation messaging about the Houston Zoo's conservation partners, initiatives, and animals
- Planning and facilitating daily morning teambuilding activities
- Collaborating with peers to develop compelling stories that connect guests emotionally to animals and their habitats
- Demonstrating and teaching each Naturalist station and storytelling interpretation to Zoo Crew Explorers and make sure they are confident to facilitate each station out on grounds
- Performing observations of Zoo Crew behaviors and interpretation skills out on grounds throughout the day, fostering confidence in public speaking and interpretive techniques
- Identify opportunities for improvement within the Naturalist role and communicate this to Teen Programs staff
- Complete a project to improve an aspect of the Naturalist section of Zoo Crew
- Acting as a first line of communication of any issues that arise involving Zoo Crew Naturalists
- May be asked to act as a fill-in in other Zoo Crew sections as needed

SCHEDULE

Spring 2026 (Pre-Summer Planning)

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These meetings are mandatory training to prepare for your role in the summer. The meetings are also an opportunity for the Teen Leadership Council to get to know each other and your session partners.

Mandatory Meeting Dates:

- Sunday, March 1, 2026: 9am-4pm
- Saturday, April 11, 2026: 9am-4pm
- Sunday, May 3, 2026: 9am-4pm

Summer 2026

The following outline provides a general overview of the Summer 2026 schedule. Dates and tasks may shift before the program begins, and some minor duties are not listed. The schedule runs consecutively during **Session 1 (June 1–July 3)** or **Session 2 (July 6–August 7)**.

- **Daily Tasks**
 - Lead morning meetings and teambuilding activity for Naturalists
 - Taking attendance of all Zoo Crew participating as a Naturalist
 - Facilitate debrief meetings and provide feedback throughout the week
 - Mentor Zoo Crew Naturalists interpretation and storytelling best practices and share animals' stories with them.
- **Weekly Tasks**
 - **Week 1:** Develop Naturalist station and storytelling rotation schedule
 - **Week 2:** Facilitate Naturalist station training and Radio Training with Explorers
 - **Week 3:** Identify project focus and discuss with Teen Program staff
 - **Week 4:** Continue working on approved project
 - **Week 5:** Complete approved project

Year-Round Zoo Crew

After the summer, Teen Leadership Council will have monthly mandatory meetings in the Fall and Spring. At these meetings TLC will be debriefing from the summer, planning for future events such as World Lemur Festival, and discussing future Zoo Crew projects.

Tentative Fall 2026 meeting schedule:

- September 12, 2026: 9am-4pm
- October 11, 2026: 9am-4pm
- November 8, 2026: 9am-4pm
- December 12, 2026: 9am-4pm

Beyond the monthly meetings, TLC members are expected to participate in Year-Round Zoo Crew events, either in a leadership capacity or as Zoo Crew. The minimum requirements are:

Fall (October – January)

- Three shifts of Naturalist or Camp Mentor

Spring (January – May)

- Three shifts of Naturalist

QUALIFICATIONS AND REQUIREMENTS

- Have one year of Zoo Crew completed
- Be in good standing in the Zoo Crew program

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- Be 15 years old by May 31, 2026
- Be between the ages of 15 and 17 *through* the end of your summer session
- Be able and committed to attend **3 mandatory training meetings** in the Spring 2026
- Be able to commit to **ALL** 5 weeks of one of the Zoo Crew Explorers sessions in the Summer 2026
- Be able to continue through the Year-Round Zoo Crew program and attend monthly meetings in the Fall 2026/Spring 2027

PREFERRED SKILLS

- Ability to lead Zoo Crew in your peer group
- Flexibility with day-to-day routines
- Knowledge of the Naturalist position and interpretation skills
- Knowledge of and experience leading team building activities
- Public speaking

TO APPLY

Submit application by **Saturday, January 17th at 11:59pm**. Interviews will occur between January 31st - February 8th, 2026. Applicants will be chosen based on their application, interview, and previous evaluations.

PARENTAL/GUARDIAN AGREEMENT

Being part of the Teen Leadership Council is a significant commitment. We want to ensure that all TLC members and their parents/guardians understand and agree to commit to all required meetings/participation dates as outlined above.

FAQ

Can I participate in more than five weeks of TLC or Zoo Crew?

TLC members are scheduled for one five-week session. You may participate in additional weeks only if you are serving as a Naturalist, Camp Mentor, or Junior Zookeeper. In some cases, Teen Programs Staff may invite you to assist with Zoo Crew activities or allow you to work on a designated project or committee (e.g., the Bird or Snake Saving Campaign). To prevent burnout, total participation is limited to a maximum of eight weeks during the summer.

What if I can't attend a Spring mandatory meeting?

Spring training meetings are required, as they prepare you for the summer program and cover essential information and skills. Please make every effort to adjust your schedule so you can attend. Spring training dates are listed above.

If you are unable to attend a mandatory meeting, please notify Teen Programs Staff as soon as possible. We understand that emergencies or special circumstances may arise and appreciate your timely communication. The best way to reach us is by email at teenprograms@houstonzoo.org.

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What is the attendance expectation for monthly meetings?

TLC is a collaborative leadership program, and every member's presence helps the group succeed. Members are expected to attend monthly meetings as regular participation is key to leadership growth and teamwork. While we understand that occasional conflicts may happen, members should aim to attend at least 75% of meetings to remain in good standing. Members who consistently miss meetings may be asked to meet with Teen Programs Staff to discuss their commitment to the program.