



## Charles and Lynn Zhang SkyLark Ridge announced at Binder Park Zoo

**May 17, 2022 Battle Creek, MI:** Binder Park Zoo has announced a “high-flying” attraction of epic proportions coming to the zoo this summer. Construction has begun on a permanent aerial adventure called Charles and Lynn Zhang SkyLark Ridge (SkyLark Ridge) where zoo-goers can awaken their inner explorer! This thrilling, three-story ropes course style attraction will feature five modern zip lines that curve around the structure allowing participants to soar freely through the air suspended by a safety harness. A separate structure called “Little Larks” will have the same components but scaled for younger guests under 48” tall to have the same exciting experience. Each participant is fitted with a five-point full body safety harness and locked into a secured single redundant sling line the entire time they are on either attraction. An overhead tracking system allows guests the choice to walk or climb elements and obstacles like rope ladders, suspended bridges, cargo nets and more at their own pace on whatever level they choose to explore. SkyLark Ridge will be an exhilarating adventure that combines family, fitness and fun inside the beautiful park-like setting of the zoo.

SkyLark Ridge is a custom project engineered for safety and designed for fun by RCI Adventure Products, of Allegan, MI. A leader in the adventure product industry, RCI Adventure Products has more than thirty years’ experience and over 1000 installations on five continents to their credit. The zoo’s course design will anchor to eight steel columns that spans 15,000 total square feet rising to 36’ at its highest point for spectacular views of zoo grounds.

The cost to build SkyLark Ridge is \$2,000,000 of which the zoo has raised \$1,800,000 to date in donations from generous benefactors. Lead donors Charles and Lynn Zhang launched the fundraising campaign with an historic gift of \$1,000,000 and the overall naming rights.

“The Zhangs are philanthropists in the truest sense of the word, and their incredible support for this project at Binder Park Zoo not only elevates our mission, but our message of conservation, too,” stated Diane Thompson, zoo President & CEO. “Charles and Lynn share a deep love and respect for wildlife and they understand that meaningful zoo experiences can change the narrative for saving animal species. Their gift is an investment in the preservation of our natural world for, which we are very grateful,” Thompson said.

Major gifts from The Irving S. Gilmore Foundation, Tom and Gayle Kolassa, Mrs. Joan Higgins and the Battle Creek Community Foundation in memory of Dr. Russell G. Mawby comprise the next tier of funding for SkyLark Ridge. Extraordinary support from the Calhoun County Visitors Bureau, Consumers Energy, the Thomas & Gloria Olin Family Foundation, Rick & Linda Tsoumas, Vince and Caroline Pavone, Charlie and Anne Burnham Family Foundation and Oaklawn Hospital have also been received, together with the full support of the zoo’s Board of Directors. The zoo continues to work on raising the remaining funds and plans to roll out a public campaign to be announced soon.

The Charles & Lynn Zhang SkyLark Ridge will be located in the East Zoo across from the Binder Conservation Carousel and will be the largest structure of its kind in the state of Michigan. Initially, the experience will be available to zoo guests, but once complete, the zoo will modify a new, separate entrance for guests to enter SkyLark Ridge as an exclusive experience.

"The excitement around SkyLark Ridge has been contagious. We are grateful to both our donors and our Directors for this project. SkyLark Ridge is an essential next step for the zoo and is something the entire family can enjoy to create great memories. The important thing is that SkyLark Ridge is helping us fulfill our mission to connect people with nature and inspire them to conserve," states, Diane Thompson.

“The concept of some type of zip line attraction at the zoo had been under consideration as far back as the mid-1990s when Wild Africa was being developed,” said Leslie Walsh, Director of Marketing & Development, “but the timing wasn’t right then. Judging from the enthusiasm and extraordinary support we’ve enjoyed, the time is clearly right for SkyLark Ridge at Binder Park Zoo,” Walsh continued.

SkyLark Ridge will have a positive impact on the local and state economy. The increase of visitors' stay time in the area will result in additional gas, food, and lodging purchases. It will encourage visitors to explore other attractions, activities and venues in the region as well. It will also create additional fun, fair-paying seasonal jobs at the zoo. Staff will be hired and trained exclusively to manage SkyLark Ridge and will receive extensive operational and safety instruction.

“We are lucky to have the trusted, highly skilled contractors with specialized construction expertise that we need, right here in West Michigan,” states Damon Hicks, Director of Facilities and project manager for SkyLark Ridge. “Zoo projects are typically very unique and they require precise expertise in order to meet specific goals. Many zoos don’t have that local access, they need to import those skills from elsewhere, usually at great expense,” Hicks continued “We’re fortunate because we have great partners with the needed expertise both in our corner, and right around the corner.”

While zoo staff has not announced an exact opening date for SkyLark Ridge, it is expected to be open this summer.