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Checkpoint Zoo' Review: Operation Animal Rescue

This documentary retraces the heart-rending evacuation of animals from an outdoor zoo near the front lines of the Russia-Ukraine War.

By Nicolas Rapold

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Checkpoint Zoo Directed by Joshua Zeman • Documentary • Not Rated • 1h 43m

Since 2022, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has caused the deaths of almost 1.4 million troops and thousands of innocent civilians. “Checkpoint Zoo” spotlights a (mostly) four-legged group that has also been affected: animals at Feldman Ecopark, an outdoor zoo located near the city of Kharkiv, Ukraine’s second-largest city. Joshua Zeman’s heartstring-tugging documentary retraces the evacuation of thousands of beasts at the risk of shelling and other attacks.

Workers and volunteers first tried to feed the animals on visits to the zoo. But weeks of war and winter necessitated the gradual removal of the hungry, traumatized population to other zoos and safe havens. These death-defying rescues are the movie’s reason for existing; clips have gone viral. (New interviews and visits are combined with 120 hours of footage from media organizations, Feldman Ecopark and other sources.)

It's astonishing to watch a van full of tapirs speeding to safety, or to see a drugged lion carried out. The devotion and bravery of the rescuers is striking, and Ecopark's founder, Oleksandr Feldman, seems a genuine animal lover, safeguarding many on his estate. Yet the movie has a serial, emotion-milking quality — serving up the amazing, cute, and tear-jerking — like a TV news story spun out to feature length.

One remains grateful that ostriches, kangaroos, bears, and apes were saved, avoiding the dire fate of other wartime zoo residents. "Checkpoint Zoo" portrays a caged and dependent menagerie that bewilderingly experienced humans at their worst and, fortunately, their best.

Checkpoint Zoo

Not rated. Running time: 1 hour 43 minutes. In theaters.

Checkpoint Zoo

Director Joshua Zeman

Writers Daniel Lonsbury, Joshua Zeman

Rating Not Rated

Running Time 1h 43m

Genre Documentary

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