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Russian Zookeeper Accused of Stealing Animals From Ukraine's Kherson Claims Relocation 'Temporary'

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Nikolai Trishin / TASS

A Russian zookeeper accused of stealing animals from a zoo in Ukraine's Kherson amid Russian forces' retreat from the city told The Moscow Times on Tuesday that he was "helping out the Kherson animals" by "providing them with accommodation for a while."

Video footage that circulated on social media over the weekend showed zookeeper Oleg Zubkov accompanied by Russian soldiers as he picked up a zoo raccoon by its tail and placed the animal in a box.

In total, seven raccoons, two wolves, peacocks, a llama and a donkey were taken from Kherson Zoo.

Zubkov said he had been asked by Vladimir Saldo, the head of the Kremlin-installed Kherson regional administration, to evacuate the animals from the war zone.

“That wasn’t my idea,” Zubkov said in a phone interview.

“I agreed [to help the animals] and transported them to a temporary shelter in Taigan Park,” Zubkov told The Moscow Times, referring to his zoo in Russia-annexed Crimea.

According to Zubkov, the animals would be returned to Kherson “at the first request of the legal local authorities.”

“If they reconstruct the zoo — since the conditions there are terrible — I will even give them more animals from my zoo,” Zubkov claimed.

In a video posted to YouTube on Tuesday, Zubkov showed the raccoons in huge cages in his park in Crimea and said that the animals had everything they needed.

“The raccoons live in excellent conditions,” Zubkov said in the video.

Ukrainian authorities expressed outrage over the incident with Anton Gerashchenko, an adviser to Ukraine’s Interior Minister, accusing Russian forces of “stealing” the animals.

For Zubkov, the media attention and accusations of stealing are nothing new.

Earlier this year, Zubkov was convicted of negligence in Russia after one of his tigers bit a one-year-old boy's finger off in 2021.

In 2019, Zubkov asked the public to adopt 30 bears from his park and threatened to euthanize the animals if they did not, as he could no longer afford to care for them.

“There's no such thing as bad PR,” Zubkov told The Moscow Times.

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