



Among the many exotic creatures in the Animal Roadshow is this impressive python



Harry Potter fans will be delighted to make the acquaintance of this owl.

Duhallow zoo reinvents itself for life in lockdown

Ballydaly's Animal Roadshow goes online with virtual wild parties

CONCUBHAR Ó LIATHÁIN

A DUHALLOW animal roadshow which used to do a roaring trade bringing exotic creatures to childrens' birthday parties and nursing homes has had to take its business online due to the restrictions of life in lockdown.

Having survived the recession brought on by the banking crisis, the Animal Roadshow, based in Ballydaly near Millstreet, is now having to reinvent itself once again in order to cope with the challenges of the COVID-19 era.

Before the virus hit, the Animal Roadshow was travelling to childrens' homes for birthday parties, to nursing homes, to centres for children with special needs and it was also running corporate events - Christmas parties and team building days for instance.

As a licensed zoo, the Animal Roadshow has a wide range of animals, birds and other creatures - snakes, lizards, owls, chinchillas, hamsters and guinea pigs are all included in the menagerie.

Now the emphasis is on hosting 'wild parties' on online platforms such as Zoom and Facebook and every Sunday they have a wildlife party in a shed at the bottom of the garden which they've recommissioned as a studio for these events.

"Since lockdown started all our old business disappeared and we've had numerous challenges to overcome to be able to cope in some way with life in lockdown," said Roadshow founder Marie Lennon Fleming.

"We've made it a real family affair and our children now are taking a central role in helping



Marie Fleming with one of her exotic creatures.

us with the animals."

Another issue which crops up is feeding the 60 or so animals on site at their home.

"We've built a polytunnel which is going well and we're getting lots of food for the animals from there - we're also getting donations of food for the animals from locals and that's a help too.

"Our focus now is to keep going with the virtual wild parties and, also, to see what's going to happen when the restrictions are eased.

"At the moment we think we may be able to reopen in

August when more people will be able to get together but that doesn't mean that we'll be inundated with bookings as peoples' mindsets will have changed and they may not want that kind of experience as much as they did previously."

It all started in 2005 when Marie's daughter was still a tiny baby. "I was unqualified on paper, with just a Junior Cert equivalent behind me and a background in retail," said Marie, who runs the business with her husband, Brendan.

"It was extremely important for me to have a job that



This lizard feels right at home in its home in Ballydaly

worked around my family, so with my background experience working with the public and animals so I set up The Animal Roadshow.

"I got so busy that, after a while, my husband took a leap of faith and gave up his stonemason career to join me.

"It was not unusual to be brainstorming at 3am on ways to improve, creating new and

fresh party packages, painting props and signs etc," she said.

Through their mobile education programme they introduce a variety of exotic creatures in a safe and entertaining way, with close encounters and loads of handling opportunities! Their selection generally includes lizards, snakes, owls, tortoises and much more.

Their company operates

mainly in the Munster region but have worked nationwide, as far as the Arran Islands down to West Cork. In 2018 Marie was shortlisted for a Duhallow Business Award for her role in leading the Animal Road Show.

You can get further information about The Animal Road Show on their website, www.theanimalroadshow.com and their social media pages.