The Upsides and Downsides of the Job of a Zookeeper

Zookeepers can be exposed to bites, kicks, and diseases from the animals they attend. Keepers may work outdoors in all kinds of weather. Hours are irregular. Animals have to be fed every day, so caretakers rotate weekend shifts. In some zoo animal hospitals, an attendant is on duty twenty-four hours a day, which means night shifts. Most full-time zookeepers work about forty hours a week, some work fifty hours a week, or more.

In spite of the odd hours and hard work, zoo keeping jobs are at a premium. Although competition is fierce, the job outlook is good as opportunities continue to expand.

"Working with elephants can be very rewarding. In a sense you are more than just a handler, you are actually part of their herd, your little family away from home. Elephants are very intelligent and affectionate animals and a pleasure to work with. I have learned quite a lot. You have respect for them and they respect you. It's a mutual relationship. Knowing that you are responsible for the daily care of these animals and doing it correctly and efficiently leaves you with a great feeling. Observing your animals also can be fun-watching them eat the trees you just cut down for them or watching the elephants splash and play in the big sprinkler you hooked up over their sandbox. Just knowing that you are doing your utmost to make sure that these animals have the best possible care that you can give them is very rewarding.

"You can also be rewarded in other ways. I have been sent to three elephant managers' conferences. At one I presented a paper I wrote with one of my co-workers.

"It's never boring, but you can get cabin fever in the winter. The animals, too. But I really don't dislike that so much as I do some of the politics that can get in the way, such as disagreeing with your boss."

A WORD OF ADVICE

"You should realize that taking care of animals is a great responsibility and you need to do the best you possibly can. Being a zookeeper can be a very rewarding and educational career." - Gary Rotter, Commissary Worker.

Although Gary Rotter's current job does not involve direct contact with the animals, he is involved in work that is crucial to their well-being. He works in the Los Angeles Zoo's commissary, which is responsible for all supplies, particularly the food, needed for animal care. This is how Gary got started:

"Working in the commissary is a foot in the door for me toward a career in animal keeping. There are several current keepers who started in the commissary, and I plan on following in their foot-steps. My goal is to be picked up as an animal keeper when they hire keepers again. By combining my job performance and the training I received from the keeper class, I hope that this will be my path toward animal keeping.

"The animals I want to work with the most are the chimps. Their behavior fascinates me.

"My education is as follows: I graduated high school in 1990; attended one semester of junior college in 1991, majoring in administration of justice; and then I started correspondence school in 1992 as an animal care technician. I ultimately completed the animal keeper class at Los Angeles Community College in 1996.

"I started my current job in January of 1995. My love for animals and the environment inspired me to seek a career in the zoo business. Having many pets at home, I was able to observe and enjoy their behavior, and it fascinated me.

"At the time, I didn't know the correct path to a career in the zoo world, but I was fortunate enough to read in the local newspaper about
At the time, I didn’t know the correct path to a career in the zoo world, but I was fortunate enough to read in the local newspaper about volunteers needed for the zoo’s behavioral enrichment group. This is a group of people who work to make the animals’ time more enjoyable by renovating exhibits and setting up toys or food treats for the animals. Unfortunately, I did not have the time to volunteer then—but my brother did.

"With similar interests and a superior work ethic, my brother quickly built himself a terrific reputation. Within months, a job opened at the zoo commissary, and he was approached about employment. He accepted and impressed everyone with his efficiency and accuracy and hunger for more. Then, fortunately for me, another job opened in the commissary. Needless to say, as the brother of this work maniac, I was hired in hopes of being a good duplicate.

"My work will vary on a day-by-day basis. I fill animal diet orders for each exhibit. I follow the diets created by the curators and vets. The diets consist of produce and meat and fish. I deliver those orders as well as hay and grain to the exhibits. I also cut and deliver browse (tree branches with edible leaves) and maintain the cleanliness of our work areas, including the hay dock and grain storage area.

"My days are spent both indoors and out. The workload varies depending on the day and the time. Close visual contact with the animals is all I get in this particular position. My hours are from 7:00 A.M. to 3:30 P.M.

"What I like the most about my job is that I get a variety of things to do each day. What I like least is the fact I have to work my five days a week, even on holidays. But the animals need to eat, so I have to work.

"My advice for any prospective commissary or zoo employee is to have a strong back. You’d better not mind getting dirty, too. And do not think you are going to get rich. Most of all make sure you like animals."