Training for Zookeepers and Zookeeping Jobs

Some colleges have specific programs oriented toward zoo careers. One such program is offered by the Santa Fe Community College’s Teaching Zoo in Gainesville, Florida. Another is the Exotic Animal Training Management Program that Moorpark College in California offers. The American Association of Zookeepers, whose address is listed in Appendix A, is a good source for training and education information for potential zookeepers.

But education and experience are not all that it takes. Successful zookeepers should be knowledgeable about the animals in their facilities as well as the animals’ natural habitat and behavior.

Zookeepers also often interact with the public. They need to be friendly, outgoing, and professional and be able to answer questions from visitors.

Zookeeping is demanding work requiring physical strength, commitment, and dedication. Employers look for reliable people who are willing to learn and take their work seriously. The lives and well-being of the animals depend upon the care of the zookeeper. This role is an extremely important one.

Once hired, most facilities provide on-the-job training, and most zookeepers start off in a zookeeper-in-training capacity before moving into a full zookeeper job title.

ADVANCEMENT

Most zoos have career ladders for zookeepers. They might start out as zookeepers-in-training, then move from junior zookeeper to full zookeeper, then up to senior zookeeper and even supervisor. Some, after many years of experience, can move into curatorial and administrative positions. But as is true with most job settings, the higher up you go, the less hands-on work you encounter. Many zookeepers who prefer direct contact with the animals will halt their own advancement so as not to get bogged down in the paperwork that accompanies more administrative work.

ZOOKEEPER RANKINGS

Here is an example of the keeper rankings found at Lion Country Safari in West Palm Beach, Florida.

Keeper 1. An entry-level position requiring a bachelor’s degree in a life science or at least two years’ experience at a zoological facility.

Keeper 2. This rank demands the same requirements as the Keeper 1 position except that another year or two of experience is expected.

Keeper 3. This rank would go to someone with a bachelor’s degree and at least five years experience.

Keeper 4. This position requires at least a bachelor’s degree and between seven and nine years experience.

To start at any of the higher ranks, a zookeeper would be transferring from another facility or working his or her way up the ranks at the original facility.

CLOSE-UP: DETROIT ZOOLOGICAL INSTITUTE

The Detroit Zoological Institute comprises three facilities: the Detroit Zoo with 125 acres of naturalistic habitat in Royal Oak, approximately ten miles north of Detroit; and the Belle Isle Zoo and Belle Isle Aquarium, both located on Belle Isle, an island park in Detroit.
The Detroit Zoological Institute features a total collection of 2,500 to 3,000 animals. At the Detroit Zoo approximately 1,200 to 1,300 animals are exhibited. This includes mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, and invertebrates of some 250 species.

The Belle Isle Zoo has about 200 animals of 40 to 50 species, and the Belle Isle Aquarium typically exhibits about 1,500 animals made up of mostly fish with some reptiles, amphibians, and invertebrates.

The Detroit Zoological Institute strives to promote respect, appreciation, and ethical attitudes toward wildlife and works toward conservation programs for the survival of endangered species.

Volunteering at the Detroit Zoological Institute

An important function of the Education Division is the Detroit Zoo Docent Association. This is a group of well-trained volunteers who act as informed guides for groups visiting the zoo, transforming the experience from a simple visit to education about wildlife.

Volunteers are an important part of the Detroit Zoological Institute, and they offer volunteer opportunities for people of all ages.

Gallery Guides are the volunteer staff of the Wildlife Interpretive Gallery. Training is given in a short four-hour period. Guides help visitors as they enjoy the coral reef aquarium, butterfly and hummingbird garden, film theater, permanent art collection, and changing exhibit hall. No prior experience is required, and training includes an information manual and the opportunity to learn about butterflies and coral reefs.

Docents are volunteer educators. Docents participate in a longer training program of ten weeks and learn all about the Zoological Institute and the animal collection. Docents lead group tours, teach outreach programs for schools and community groups, narrate tractor-train tours, and work on special projects with the curatorial staff.

Adopt-a-Gardeners take care of the dozens of gardens around the Detroit Zoological Park. This is a chance for avid amateur gardeners to show off their gardening skills to more than one million visitors per year.

For more information about volunteering at the Detroit Zoological Institute, contact the education division.