The Qualifications You'll Need to Become Animal Behaviorists

Most animal behaviorists earn a doctorate degree in animal behavior programs in university psychology or zoology departments. They also must combine hands-on experience with their research interests.

FIRSTHAND ACCOUNT

Mary Lee Nitschke, Animal Behaviorist

Mary Lee Nitschke has a Ph.D. in comparative developmental psychobiology from Michigan State University and more than thirty years experience in this exciting field. In addition to the many hats she wears, Dr. Nitschke is also a consultant to the Metro Washington Park Zoo in Portland, Oregon. Dr. Nitschke explains: "The Washington Park Zoo employs a full-time animal behaviorist. I work on a consulting basis with her, doing training seminars for zookeepers on how to interact with and handle animals.

"I also give talks on wolf-dog crosses because the zoo gets questions about them all the time. The zoo has wolves, so people come with their concerns about their own pets. The Northwest is a hotbed for people owning wolves as pets. It's pretty hard on everyone, though it doesn't keep people from doing it. In a wolf-dog cross, the biggest problem I see professionally is the quality of life for that animal. If it's high percentage wolf, it's likely to be terrified of people. The second problem is unpredictability. We have no way of knowing when the wolf part is going to be operative and when the dog part is. These wolf-dog crosses have a rap very similar to pit bulls and rottweilers. It's not the same problem at all, but it looks like the same problem because they maul children frequently.

"I also do training with the zookeepers, teaching them how to manage animals in the zoo environment and how to understand and use operant behavior and clicker training. The animal is trained to click a bar that will deliver food to it as a reward. One of my colleagues was working with an ape that was diabetic and needed to have a blood sample drawn every day. Through clicker training, she taught the chimp to put its arm in a sleeve outside the cage and grasp a bar so that the blood sample could be taken quickly and efficiently without anybody being endangered. The reward was food and the animal was fine about it.

"Another one she did was to teach an elephant to present its feet for cleaning through the fence. This was an aggressive male elephant, and nobody could go in and do this. Through operant conditioning, it was taught to hold its feet up to a little panel and then they could be cleaned that way.

"I also worked with one of their birds of prey that wouldn't allow keepers in. Basically, when keepers have a problem, they call me."

BECOMING ANIMAL BEHAVIORIST

"For someone who wants to become an animal behaviorist, first of all, you have to have hands-on experience. And the more time you spend observing animals and learning how to interact with them, the better off you're going to be. The second thing is that you have to get educated to learn to understand, evaluate, and think like a scientist.

"Hands-on experience is very important. I don't think this is a profession that can be done totally by theory. On the other hand, the hands-on experience can't come totally from trial and error methods.

"I think the best route is to take a lot of experimental courses - psychology or in other fields. Some anthropology courses do a good job of preparing people. There are disciplines of animal behavior, both within psychology and zoology. I think that a good psychology background is important, not just for experimental psych, but if you take a major in psychology in almost any school in the country, you will have to take experimental psychology and statistics. Applied statistics is something I use on a daily basis. I'll give you an example. Every time a client comes to see me with a behavioral situation, in my mind I run that situation through a statistical analysis and can then give the probable reasons for why that behavior is occurring. My training and my knowledge of animal behavior allows me to put that situation
In addition to her zoo consulting work, Dr. Nitschke is a full-time, tenured, full professor in the psychology department at Linfield College in Portland, Oregon. There she teaches a variety of courses from Applied Animal Behavior and Human Animal Relationships, to People Pet Partnerships in Health Care.

She is also owner of Animal School, Incorporated (in Beaverton, Oregon), and through private consultations and classes, provides clients with help in solving pet behavior problems.

Here is an example of the kind of problems she sees. "Recently a fellow came in with a six-year-old bulldog mix. It looked an awful lot like a pit bull. It was a big dog, ninety pounds, and he had bitten seven people. I went through each bite. Some of these bites were almost to be expected because they resulted from inappropriate behavior on the part of the owner. In one instance the owner sent a plumber carrying a pipe into the dog's territory without announcing him. Well, he already knew the dog was territorial and didn't usually admit strangers. I don't count that bite. That was to be expected. In another instance, a teenage boy had been playing with the dog, then turned very abruptly and jumped on his bike. The dog went for him. Given this particular dog, the probability of that happening was pretty high and when you add all those bites up, the probability that the dog will bite again is also very high. Putting the dog to sleep is one of the major options I counseled the owner about, but you can't make that decision for the client. My job in that situation is to say, 'here are the likely scenarios-what will happen if you do nothing or if you do this, that, or the other?'

"What he wanted from me was to give him a training program that would guarantee that the dog wouldn't bite anyone again. But there is no such program. Most of the time you're working with the person, not the animal, and that's why you must have some grounding in counseling to do this work."

In addition, Dr. Nitschke does a lot of public speaking and is also a consultant for the invisible fencing industry. "Those are the major things," Dr. Nitschke explains, "but other things come up. I do training for the animal control people sometimes. I train them on how to handle animals, how to approach an animal when they have to go onto a property, because that's one of the most dangerous jobs in the world-going onto an animal's property and trying to pick it up."