



Zoo Edition Archives - Fall 2007

Excerpts from an interview with Dana Payne, WPZ Animal Curator

WPZ: Your title is Animal Curator. What duties does that job involve?

DP: I oversee animal care for roughly one third of the zoo's animal collection. The zoo is divided into three parts, with a team that cares for the animals in that third — North Team, West Team, and East Team, plus a fourth team that cares for the zoo's elephants. Each team is led by a curator. I'm the "North Team Curator." My area includes Northern Trail, Raptors, Australasia and Day and Night Exhibits; I manage the collection for those areas. The Zoo's Commissary is also one of my responsibilities.

WPZ: What does it mean to manage a collection?

DP: Each year, and on an ongoing basis, I put together a draft plan for which North Team animals we should keep, place or breed. After it has been reviewed by involved staff, I implement the plan by acquiring the designated animals and moving some animals to other zoos. I work with the keepers to assure that the animals are well cared for and those animals that we'd like to breed are encouraged to do so.

WPZ: Do you have a favorite group of animals?

DP: I am also the Curator of Reptiles (and Amphibians), so when an issue comes up that involves those animals, I am usually the first contact. This is particularly true of the work the zoo is doing to increase the numbers of western pond turtles here in Washington, through headstarting and captive breeding. The pond turtles that we have here at the zoo are not North Team animals, but I have been very involved in that project since it began.

WPZ: Every job seems to have some "other duties as assigned." What are your "other duties?"

DP: I created and maintain several large databases that zoo staff uses to manage keeper schedules, facility work orders, safety issues, keepers' animal records and daily reports, and food ordering and inventory for the commissary.

One of the key elements in operating a successful zoo is a proper record system. I translated the animal records database so that it would be useful for Latin American zoos and endangered animal breeding centers. The zoo has so far sent me to Panama and Ecuador, where I've installed it at three locations, providing those institutions with an essential tool for animal management.

WPZ: Any other projects you are working on?

DP: I'm more or less the zoo's historian. I maintain the collection of historic artifacts, and am writing a book about the history of the zoo. Recently, we uncovered the original granite lintel — the carved arch that marked the entrance to the park back in the 1890s. It's great, and because it is carved granite, it is in perfect condition. I hope it will be installed at the zoo's new northwest entry.

WPZ: What did you study in school to get this job?

DP: I am definitely an exception — I am one of the few people at the zoo who managed to get their job without a college degree. I was a zoo volunteer while I was in college, and left school when I was offered my first zookeeper job. I intended to go back and finish at some point, but never did. When I was at university, I did take a lot of math and science classes. A lot of the information that we use here at the zoo is fairly specialized, and I spend a lot of my money on books that are useful references for my job, books about natural history and animal care.

WPZ: Any advice for students who would like a job like yours?

DP: Read a lot. Get experience anywhere you can, at a zoo, or at another animal care facility. Start as a volunteer, and go from there. Get a degree in a related field, such as zoology, biology, wildlife management or another related subject. And read some more.