



1. What do zoo keepers like best about their jobs?

The personal and professional satisfaction that zoo keepers find in their jobs varies from person to person. Most zoo keepers have a deep and lifelong love for animals and really enjoy providing for their day-to-day care. For many zoo keepers the satisfaction of caring for animals that represent some of the last of their species on earth, and sometimes helping to preserve these species through captive management programs is the greatest reward of the job. Being instrumental in the lives of these animals and helping their species to survive is very gratifying.

For safety reasons, close contact between zoo keepers and animals is very limited and strictly managed. However, even with limited contact, the relationships that develop between zoo keepers and the animals they care for are often strong and can be the most rewarding aspect of the job.

One of a zoo keeper's most important -- and fun -- duties is to provide daily enrichment for the animals. This can take the form of anything from hiding treats for foraging, providing special "toys," or using scents to stimulate the animals' senses and encourage natural behavior and activity. Coming up with new and novel forms of enrichment and watching the animals enjoy them is always at the top of a zoo keeper's list of satisfying job duties.

Animal training is another important zoo keeper duty. Zoo keepers reward the animals to encourage certain behaviors. These may include teaching the animal to show its paws for visual inspection, or allowing themselves to be injected with medication or vaccines. This allows the animals to be treated without stress. Training further increases the bond between zoo keeper and animal, but requires considerable patience, skill and knowledge of animal behavior. Nevertheless, many zoo keepers consider this one of their favorite activities.

At most zoos, including Woodland Park Zoo, zoo keepers are key parts of our education programs, as well. Talking to zoo visitors, giving formal talks and presentations about animals and conservation, and even making school classroom visits is now a typical part of a zoo keeper's job. Many zoo keepers find interacting with guests one of the most enjoyable parts of their day.

2. What kind of education and/or background does a zoo keeper need?

For zoo keeping positions at Woodland Park Zoo, a Bachelor's degree in a life sciences field from a four-year college or university; and two years related experience and/or training; or equivalent combination of education and experience is required.

Nationally, a college degree in a life science field (zoology, biology, animal behavior, marine biology, exotic animal management/ zoo keeping) is advantageous in the competitive field of zoo keeping. You will find it difficult to impossible to get hired as a zoo keeper without experience. Some ways to gain zoo keeper experience include: volunteering, internships, or seasonal or intermittent/temporary zoo keeper positions. At Woodland Park Zoo, in order to be eligible for a zoo keeper position, you must have two years (approximately 4,000 hours) of paid experience in an AZA (Association of Zoos & Aquariums) accredited facility or the equivalent. This paid experience may include hours earned as an intermittent/temporary zoo keeper. There is stiff competition for zoo keeper positions. Most zoo keepers have put in many years of volunteer or low-wage work before obtaining full-time, regular zoo keeper positions.

3. What are useful subjects to take in high school?

As many biology and other science courses as possible would provide a good foundation. Writing, computer and other communication skills are also very important. Spend some of your free time reading or using other media to learn about animals, plants and the natural world.

4. Where can I get a "zoo" degree?

There are several Associate degree programs in the US designed to teach students to become professional animal keepers:

Jefferson Community College, SUNY, Watertown, New York

Moorpark College, Moorpark, California

Pensacola Junior College, Pensacola, Florida

Santa Fe Community College, Gainesville, Florida

5. What are a zoo keeper's daily duties? What is involved in a typical day?

A zoo keeper's typical day may look something like the following (however, this would depend on what types of animals are cared for by the zoo keeper):

8:00 a.m.

- Begin the day by checking on the animals, making sure that all the animals are accounted for, and observing them for any abnormal behavior or signs of illness or injury. Often when animals are sick, they will exhibit signs of sickness in the morning.
- Prepare morning diets.
- Clean outdoor enclosure while the animals are still inside.
- Feed animals their morning diets.
- Practice training routines with animals.

9:30 a.m.

- Shift animals to outdoor exhibit by the time the zoo opens.
- Clean indoor holding areas.
- Participate in crew meeting.

12:00 p.m.

Lunch

1:00 p.m.

- Prepare afternoon diets.
- Provide enrichment; observe animal responses.
- Finish cleaning and complete other projects.
- Talk informally with zoo visitors or give a formal "keeper talk" presentation.
- Write daily reports for each animal. Update animal records.

4:00 p.m.

- Shift animals to indoor holding areas or set up for evening with night zoo keeper.
- Feed animals their afternoon diets.
- Observe animals for any signs of sickness or injury.

4:30 p.m.

- Lock up before leaving.

Of course each day is different from the next, with different projects to complete, meetings to attend, educational programs to present for zoo visitors, or unexpected events that occur. Accomplishing the daily duties often takes the majority of an eight-hour workday. Many keepers are also significantly involved in conservation projects or educational programs for which they must find time during their daily routines. Zoo keepers continue learning throughout their whole careers, and may spend part of the day on library/internet research and reading books and scientific journals.

For a slideshow and more information on what it takes to be a zoo keeper, visit the [Zoo Careers](#) section of our website.

6. What are the safety considerations involved in zoo keeping?

It is important to remember that zoo animals, while they live in captivity, are not tame and could cause serious injury.

For the most part, zoo keepers and animals do not share the same space without some form of adequate safety barrier between them. Contact is limited even with young animals, because it is generally best to allow the parents to raise their offspring as naturally as possible. When young are raised by their parents they learn important social interactions and communication appropriate for their species. Also, parent-raised young retain a more cautious attitude towards humans, creating a safer situation for the zoo keepers who work with the animals when they become adults.

Zoo keepers must be constantly aware of the safety hazards of their job. They must use all of their senses to know what is going on around them at all times. Zoo keepers and other zoo staff have emergency training and are well rehearsed in what to do in case of emergency. Emergency drills are held several times a year. All zoo keepers get special orientation and training in the specific areas where they will be working and the animals in those areas. As part of this training, they learn the daily routine and safety protocols for that area. It is important for keepers to be conscientious about locking locks and double-checking them. Good zoo keepers are extremely dependable and responsible.

Zoo keepers must follow proper hygiene and housekeeping practices to ensure both animal and human health and to prevent the spread of zoonotic diseases (diseases that can move from animals to humans). Frequent hand-washing, disinfecting foot baths, and using gloves and masks while handling feces and body fluids provide protection. Certain species carry particular health risks. Zoo keepers working in those areas must use extra precautions, which may include goggles and protective clothing.

Other safety concerns for zoo keepers are similar to the types of injuries common to all jobs requiring any amount of physical labor. Injuries from lifting, repetitive motion (e.g., carpal tunnel syndrome), and trips and falls are potential hazards. Zoo keepers must follow good work practices to minimize the risk of injury.

7. What types of medical situations do zoo keepers handle? What types of medical procedures do the veterinarians handle?

The most important job for a zoo keeper in relation to the health of the animals is to be observant. Any abnormal behavior, such as a change in eating habits, could be a sign of sickness or injury.

Most wild animals do not tend to show major signs of sickness. In the wild, a sick-looking animal would be more prone to attack by other animals than would a healthy-looking animal. Therefore, zoo keepers must be extremely observant in order to detect any subtle irregularities in an animal's behavior, physical condition or routine. These irregularities can indicate that something is not quite right with the animal.

If zoo keepers observe abnormal behavior they may collect urine, feces or other samples to be analyzed by the veterinarian. These samples are also collected and analyzed on a regular basis to monitor the health of all zoo animals. When animals need long-term routine medicine, injections, rehydration, hand-feeding or wound care, zoo keepers may incorporate these duties into their daily routines. The veterinary staff performs routine examinations on some species; emergency and short-term care, such as stitching or surgery; and more extensive care if needed. Experience with caring for sick or wounded animals can be beneficial to a zoo keeper, but training in veterinary medicine is not required.

8. What do zoo keepers like least about their jobs?

Depending on the particular job and on the person, zoo keepers have different likes and dislikes about their work. However, many zoo keepers encounter similar conditions in their jobs that are difficult, repetitive and just not much fun. These include: working outside no matter what the conditions, cleaning up bodily fluids, cleaning and scrubbing animal holding areas and exhibits, and preparing animal diets. These activities must be done once or twice a day, and can become repetitive.