

Zookeeper Interview Transcript

1. What do you like about your job?

Working with the animals, of course! They are why people get into this line of work. It is very rewarding to make a difference in animals' lives every day. Breakthroughs in training are especially satisfying. When I've been working with an animal for months trying to bring out a certain behavior and one day finally they understand and are successful.

I also enjoy working outside, especially when it's nice out. Working at a desk inside all day is not for me.

I love talking with the public. Answering questions about our animals and connecting people with wildlife is very rewarding.

I love working with other people who are just as passionate as I am about the animals and taking great care of them. We are always learning new things from each other. And it is wonderful to be a part of an institution that values and contributes to wildlife conservation.

2. What don't you like about it?

If the weather is bad, either very hot or very rainy and cold, it is tough having to work outside. Being a keeper is a physically demanding job. There are uneven surfaces, ladders, cleaning chemicals, and heavy items to carry. Some keepers work around potentially dangerous animals, so they must be super vigilant about locking gates and doors.

You have to work holidays and weekends. Yes it's Christmas and the zoo is closed, but the animals still have to eat! My "weekend" is Tuesday and Wednesday instead of Saturday and Sunday, therefore it can be hard to coordinate time with family and friends.

Sometimes you have to come in early; certain part-time staff arrive at 6 am to begin food prep. Sometimes you have to stay late; if an animal is sick you might have to spend the night to watch over them.

Luckily the good things outweigh the bad! I love being a keeper and wouldn't change it for the world.

3. Describe a typical day at work.

The part-time staff and interns arrive at 6:00 am to prepare food for the animals. This involves weighing, measuring, chopping, and adding pills for vitamins or medication. Then scrubbing and spraying off all of the counters, sinks, and floor.

I arrive at 7:30 am and immediately meet with the rest of my team. We discuss the plan for the day, animals' behavioral and medical updates, any special additions to our schedule such as vet visits or special program requests, and divvy out who is accomplishing which tasks today. Then we get started with our day by feeding all the animals, which takes about two hours. We may practice training behaviors during feeds too. We have a break mid-morning. Then we clean holding areas, and do more feeds.

In the afternoon we have scheduled keeper talks; 2 in the winter and 3 in the summer. Then we eat lunch. After lunch there is time for answering emails and working on individual projects. For example, one keeper is in charge of ordering all of the food for the animals in our area. Another keeper creates and tracks enrichments for the animals. Others are in charge of

inputting all of the animal behavioral observations for the day. I'm on the animal welfare committee and often have work to do for that.

Finally, we complete our last round of feeds and training sessions. We do our final checks then head home at about 4:30.

4. Do you work with ALL the animals, all species? Do you have a favorite animal that you work with?

This depends on the zoo facility. At larger zoos, keepers tend to specialize in different areas. At smaller zoos, like Point Defiance, keepers tend to work with a larger variety of animals simply because there are fewer animals and fewer staff. For example, at a larger zoo there may be keepers that only work with primates, and they may even have a primary area within primates, such as with the orangutans. Here, each zoological area has a wide variety of species. For example, Rocky Shores keepers work with pinnipeds, sea otters, polar bears, arctic foxes, and marine birds.

It is impossible to choose a favorite animal! I love working with all of them for different reasons.

5. What's the hardest part of your job?

The hardest part is definitely when animals die or leave to live at another zoo, usually for breeding purposes. Part of my job is to build a relationship with the animals to better care for them. When an animal passes away, it feels like a close friend or family member passing away.

6. What type of education and experience do you need in this career field?

You need a four-year (Bachelor's) degree in biology, zoology, or a related field and lots of experience taking care of animals. Our full time positions here require at least three years of paid experience at an accredited zoo or aquarium. Everyone I know of started with volunteer or internship positions; some started volunteering in high school at their local zoo, animal shelter, or farm. With this experience under your belt, you can then apply to part-time, seasonal, and temporary positions. Usually these first jobs involve a lot of cleaning and food prep and not much time with the animals. But gaining experience doing the "grunt work" is super important: it shows future employers that you are dedicated to caring for the animals in whatever way is needed and that you are a hard worker and good team player.

7. What skills are the most important in your job?

Willingness to learn, observational skills, attention to detail, adaptability, positive attitude, teamwork, ability to work with people who are different from you, writing skills, math, science, and public speaking. Even if you're not good at these skills now, with deliberate practice, you can become great at each of them.

8. What are the advancement/growth opportunities?

It depends on the zoo or facility where you work. Many people work part-time for a few years before they are able to get a full time position. From a full-time position, you could become a senior or lead keeper or a curator.

9. What's something that most people don't know about this career?

It's not all about cuddling baby animals! It is hard work that requires education, expertise, caring, and teamwork. It is also very rewarding to make a difference in the lives of animals and to educate people about them.

Even though the job is primarily about working with animals, much of your time is spent interacting with people. You need to be able to work with your coworkers, supervisors, vets, and the general public. This is not a job for people who prefer animals over people, you need to like them equally!

Being a zookeeper is not a high-paying job. You can live comfortably, but you won't be rich with money. Luckily, you'll be rich with wonderful experiences and a fulfilling career.

10. What advice would you give someone who wants be a zookeeper?

You'll need dedication! If you really want to be a zookeeper, it can be a long road. This is a competitive field. Many keepers remain in their positions for a long time, so there aren't many open positions. When there are, a ton of people apply.

My advice is be willing to move and to work with any kind of animal. This flexibility will broaden your options. It's also really important to work hard and be a good team player. If you do this, your supervisors will notice and can become great references for you when you apply to jobs. On the flip side, if you don't work hard, complain, or treat your coworkers poorly, you could be passed over for filling an open position.

Also, stay positive and keep an open mind. You might not end up working with your favorite animal right away, but you might grow to love different animals. You may even choose a different career path on the way. Scientific researcher, teacher, dog trainer, horse breeder...there are many animal-related jobs to choose from.