

Newspaper Article –

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Visitors come to the zoo to have a good time. Even though we're here to work, and not just visit the zoo, it's always best to get enjoyment and fulfillment from one's job. A major goal of our efforts at the zoo is to make sure the animals here have a good life, to make sure they're enjoying themselves. With everyone (visitors, employees and animals) having a good time it's probably not surprising that sometimes things are just silly or too cute or even a little weird.

While working at another zoo, I had more than one mom persuade her little one that it was time to give up his pacifiers by convincing him to give them to an animal at the zoo, (the gorillas usually). This was generally done with a keeper meeting the parent and child in front of the exhibit for a ceremonial passing of the pacifiers from the child to the keeper. Hopefully I'm not breaking any little hearts when I tell you we didn't really give the pacifiers to the gorillas, but we were happy to help with the rite of passage. At an exhibit of animatronic dinosaurs advertised as "Dinosaurs Alive!" a school teacher complained to the zoo because the dinosaurs weren't alive (yes it was a school teacher). Four ladies were walking through a farm exhibit looking at the mixed herd (assorted breeds) of dairy cattle when one was overheard saying to her companions, "the ones with the horns are the bulls." When some visitors see a pink bird, the first thing that comes out of their mouths is, "Look at the flamingo." Some say this even if it's a roseate spoonbill which is about a third to maybe half the height of a flamingo and has a bill that's flattened out like a big wooden spoon. Identity confusion isn't solely for pink birds though. Hippos are often identified as rhinos or vice versa; lions can be tigers and the other way around too and believe it or not, giraffes have been called zebras and zebras pointed out as giraffes.

It's certainly not just visitors who are at times cute, silly, or a little different. I know of an inexperienced keeper who reported a small mammal on the loose to her supervisor. The supervisor then told her to get a net. To this she responded, "Who's Annette?" A

fellow zookeeper and I were walking elephants around the yard one morning after a big rain. There were many puddles in the yard and the elephants enjoyed playing in them. We're going along, sloshing through puddles when all of a sudden I end up with one calf-high boot totally submerged in water. Turns out the elephants had enjoyed excavating that hole quite a bit. At the time I didn't think it was that funny, but my co-worker sure got quite the laugh. I'm not sure what the elephant thought of the episode. She stood there patiently while I dumped what seemed like a gallon of water out of my boot and then we continued on our way.

Then there are the adventures of having to catch an animal after it rains. The grass is slick, the dirt has turned to mud and the animals are much more agile than we are. At times like this the team of keepers going out to wrangle the guanaco, net the Egyptian goose or catch the emus are saying silent prayers that there won't be members of the public around to watch the events that are about to transpire, but inevitably there's always an audience. It never fails, you're coming up on the animal, you're about to make a perfect grab and they do a little side step and you end up sliding right past them in the mud or even landing face first in it. Some times I think such experiences may have done more to spur on the use of loading chutes, "catch houses" and other remote-operated traps, as well as operant conditioning training, than anything else.

Consider seeing a male hog deer taking on a male Pere David's deer for the favor of the females present. For those of you who haven't seen the species involved, it's like a cocker spaniel taking on a St. Bernard. Then there's the pair of Andean bears sitting down to a meal. The male dives into his food with a true sense of abandon while the female takes each piece and relishes it. She lies next to her pile of food; she takes a quarter of an apple, holding it between her feet happily nibbling on it. Believe me, this falls into the "just too cute" category. Also in the cute category is the miniature horse who used the Belgian gelding regularly as his shade or rain shelter. The miniature horse fit right under the belly of the Belgian and the Belgian didn't seem to mind. Or there's the male ostrich that's imprinted on a keeper and does a courtship dance whenever he

sees that particular person. The dance is quite impressive but since the bird is dancing for a person, this may have to be moved to the just a bit odd category.

There are a couple of sayings that can apply here: “truth is stranger than fiction” or “a picture is worth a thousand words”. Which ever saying you pick, we can come up with a perfect example at the zoo.

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