

Newspaper Article –

Kristi Newland, General Curator

June 4, 2008

We have a few new employees at Lee Richardson Zoo. Some have come just for the summer while others will be with us much longer. When new employees begin, there are a few helpful hints I try to pass on regarding the world they have just entered. Some of the advice concerns our visitors, some the animals and some of it, just how we do things. To start with, the two questions most frequently asked by zoo visitors are: “where’s the bathroom?” and “where’s the water fountain?” so it’s good for employees to know the answers. Most of our visitors will be kids or have kids in their group. For some reason, many adults don’t think of the zoo as a place to visit unless they have kids with them. There are a number of folks though who have realized that Lee Richardson Zoo is a great place to get some exercise walking the paths while being in a safe and interesting environment. If you haven’t tried it yet, come on out and take a stroll ---- kids or not.

The animals at the zoo are wild. Some visitors may make the false assumption that because the animals are in captivity and worked with daily, that they’re tame. **WRONG!** We do have some animals that staff and/or docents, with proper training, work with more closely ---- small animals used in educational programs (hedgehogs, screech owls, bearded dragons, etc...) or animals in training programs (elephants, otters, turkey vultures and more). Even when we work with these animals in a more hands on manner, it is with certain safety restrictions and with a respect for the animal’s natural tendencies. I always remind new zoo keepers to never get totally comfortable with their zoo charges. When a keeper thinks they can predict 100% what an animal is going to do, that’s when they’ve left themselves open for a big surprise (and quite often it’s a bad one). The vast majority of our animals are separated from the public by two barriers for a reason --- **Safety!**

We have a very clean zoo. Our visitors do a pretty good job of cleaning up after themselves and that helps a great deal. Every employee also has the responsibility of

picking up trash in addition to the rest of their duties. Sure it's time away from working with the animals, planting more flowers or trees, or repairing something but it is still an important part of the job. It makes the zoo more enjoyable for all and it's safer for the animals too. Many zoos have had to perform medical procedures on animals that have eaten something that was accidentally dropped or the wind blew into their exhibit (straws, plastic bags, cigarette butts, balloons, plastic bottles, etc...), or even something purposefully thrown or given to the animal (coins, lollipops, etc...). Some animals have even died from such gastric mishaps.

Each animal is on a special diet approved by husbandry and veterinary staff. The diets are based on what's healthy for the animal. Some, like our Asiatic black bear, may be on weight-loss diets, while others may require very specific ingredients for very specific reasons (adult flamingos get their pink coloring from the carotenoids in their diet). Each diet is written down for keepers to refer to as necessary. We even have a list of approved browse plants (limbs, leaves, etc...) that are safe to feed the animals. Believe it or not, feeding the wrong kind of plant (even a few leaves) to an animal can be deadly. All of this is why we ask our visitors not to feed the animals, and our keepers to feed only what's approved for each animal.

Of course there's more advice that comes along the way and the longer the employee is at the zoo, the more they'll learn. It all focuses on being safe, learning things about the animals and enjoying the zoo. Come to think of it, that's the focus for our visitors too.

Visit our award winning website at "www.garden-city.org/zoo"