

Newspaper Article –

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Last week Lee Richardson Zoo posted our keeper aide position. It's a temporary job we offer every summer in the animal department. Keepers get some extra help and the successful applicants earn some money over the summer while gaining some valuable experience. Generally our applicants are people who think they want to be a zookeeper or something similar, and by doing this job for a summer they can make a more informed life decision. Others have already made that decision and this position will be a way to get their foot in the door of a very competitive career field. To give you a feeling of how competitive it is, the day after the posting we had a phone call from a potential candidate in New Mexico and an e-mail from another in California. Remember, we're talking about a summer job.

In the past, zookeeper jobs were filled by someone walking in off the street, with no particular talents, education or previous experience. In some cases, it could be someone with seniority in the association/city/union who simply wanted to try their hand at something different and wanted to transfer from their current position of spraying roadside weeds or whatever. While modern zoos would not be where they are today without the zookeepers of yesteryear, things don't usually work that way any more. These days, there are education and/or experience requirements to deal with if you want a full-time zookeeper job. How one meets the education requirements is pretty self-explanatory. Experience, on the other hand, can be a little more elusive (the old "I need a job to get experience but I have to have experience to get a job" conundrum). Experience can be gained through volunteer efforts (your local zoo, veterinary clinic, animal shelter, etc...), previous work experience (seasonal jobs, internships – some of these are paid positions but some aren't so be sure which is which if you're applying) or life experience (growing up dealing with animals on a family farm, 4-H, etc...).

As a full-time zookeeper, the successful applicant gets to look forward to days off in the middle of the week (possibly for years), working many holidays (again, possibly for years), “enjoying” all sorts of weather (although some jobs are indoors), and not raking in tons of dough (face it, this is not a job one takes for the money). As a zookeeper, one can choose to specialize their efforts on a certain group of animals, or work with a wide variety of species and gain more general experience. You can spend your career at one facility or move from zoo to zoo depending on what you’re looking for. A keeper can spend a lifetime caring for animals directly or move up or horizontally on the professional ladder and care for the animals in a different way (exhibit design, fund-raising, training frontline staff in caring for animals, horticulture work, maintenance, etc...).

The riches of the job aren’t monetary as I’ve already mentioned. Instead they come in other forms. The smiles of young kids visiting the zoo, the animals with which you’re up close and personal, and the experiences you share with them. How many people can say they spent the day with an elephant, watched (in person, not on TV) the birth of a chimpanzee, had the chance to compare hand size with a male orangutan or the paw of a sleeping lion, had your ear cleaned out by a tamandua, or been bitten by a capuchin. (Okay, so all the experiences may not be good ones, but they are unique!) Many times, there will be opportunities to travel to other zoos, or participate in conservation projects within the country or even internationally. And then there are the people you meet. Not only do you get to meet the wide variety of people that visit the zoo, but also the colleagues who are dedicated to the same thing to which you have dedicated your life (and some of them are famous too – Jane Goodall, Jack Hannah, etc...). Yes, it’s a competitive field and it’s worth it. So whether you want to be a zookeeper or not, come out and enjoy the zoo and the fruits of the efforts all the dedicated individuals at Lee Richardson Zoo.

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