Zoo to You column for Garden City Telegram

By Kristi Newland, Zoo Director

19 July 2017

Topic: Knowing Who's Who at the Zoo

One of the most common questions that comes up at the zoo is how do we tell the animals apart. The zoo residents don't wear "Hi I'm_____" name tags that are filled in, but there are still many ways zoo staff can recognize the individuals. Of course if we only have one of a species, like the bald eagle, that's pretty easy. The complications come when the numbers increase. Animal care staff will rely on animal behaviors, differences in natural appearances, and when needed, added means of identification.

Is someone in your family always cheery? Is the same person always the first to answer the dinner bell? Those are behaviors that can be used to identify individuals----- usually. We all have days when we don't quite feel like ourselves; we aren't that hungry, we aren't that cheery. For that reason, staff members don't rely just on behavior, but it is a place to start.

I used to work with a troop of 8 spider monkeys. Most of them were girls and most of the girls were named Mary something (i.e. Mary Jane, Mary Kate, Mary Sue, etc..). One day, my boss, the general curator, walked up to me and asked me how to tell them apart. I started to explain how they each look different. Eventually he said he just didn't see it. This was a man who could tell all the individual chimpanzees apart (there were 7 or 8 of them at the time) so he definitely had the skills. He just hadn't spent the time with the spider monkeys, just as I had some trouble with a couple of young chimps since I hadn't work with them much. I usually explain it to zoo guests by using their class or group as an example. When school starts they may not know everyone in the class but with a bit of time, they learn to recognize each individual.

Identifying individuals by their appearance can be really easy, one alpaca has red fleece while another alpaca has black fleece, or it can be a little more complicated such as one lemur having a half circle of white around the base of his tail and the other not, or one maned wolf has more of a white mustache than the other. Appearances can change so if this is how you identify someone, you have to stay current and adjust your mental picture as time goes by.

Some animals are harder to tell apart, like the red kangaroos, pronghorns, flamingos, blue faced honey-eaters, etc… There may still be some subtle differences in appearance (such as how red or gray their coat is, which direction do the horns point) or differences in behavior (such as which one is dominant, which one likes to perch on X branch and sing the morning), but a little help is needed for everyone to consistently get it right. That's when ear tags and leg bands come in handy.   Zoo residents also often have transponders (implanted microchips) that help us identify the individual if other methods fail.

It's important for us to know which animal is which at the zoo for management and husbandry reasons. You can't track an individual's health if you don't know which one didn't eat yesterday. Knowing which animal is dominant can be a clue that the particular individual isn't feeling well when all of a sudden they let another take the prime position in the habitat. A great deal of our species population planning is based on genetics, but that tool isn't very useful if we don't know which individuals are breeding.

Next time you visit the zoo, test yourself or your friends for a bit of fun. Can you tell the individual animals apart?