

Caring for All, Both Great and Small

Sarah Colman

The start of a new year is an exciting time. It's the time to think about changes we want to make, anticipate interesting challenges, and find a renewed sense of hope. Here at the zoo, the start of the year is no different. We think about the changes to enrich the lives of our animal residents and guests, plan for the challenges we see ahead, and find a renewed vigor to fulfill our mission of inspiring conservation of wildlife and wild places. One thing that doesn't change however; is the commitment of our staff to provide top notch care to every animal that calls the Lee Richardson Zoo home.

The zoo's Animal Care staff takes notes each day about the animals in their care. They use their knowledge and keen observation skills to determine if each animal is healthy. This may include checking the animal for injuries or strange behavior, determining how much it eats, or how it walks and moves. While this may seem easy for a large animal like a rhino, it can be much more difficult for a tortoise or a tarantula. How do you tell if a snake needs a visit to the vet? What can you do if an emu has arthritis? The Animal Care staff works closely with our veterinarian on each medical case to determine what might be wrong with an animal and what course of action to take to give the animal the best quality of life. This sometimes requires difficult conversations about animals we love who may be suffering from diseases or conditions we cannot fix or cure. We always try to do what is best for every individual animal, there is no one size fits all answer. Let's look at one of our recent medical cases to see how our Animal Care staff and veterinarian work together to care for our residents.

Cat Canyon is home to some of our most charismatic zoo residents. Cactus the bobcat and her companion Yazi can often be found playing together in their habitat or soaking up some sun during a catnap. Cactus is well known among her caretakers for her outgoing, friendly personality and is a staff favorite. Like many of our residents, Cactus receives a yearly physical exam. She has her blood drawn, gets x-rays, has her teeth cleaned, and has her ears and eyes checked. At 15 years old, Cactus is considered a senior citizen and the veterinarian takes extra time during her exam to check for conditions common to older animals such as heart or kidney problems and joint issues. During Cactus's physical the veterinarian found a small mass in her mammary glands. It isn't uncommon for older female cats to have masses in their mammary glands and reproductive systems. Sometimes these masses are benign, but sometimes they are not and Cactus was scheduled for surgery to remove the mass as soon as possible. Cactus's surgery went well with no complications and the mass was found to be benign.

However, after analyzing the results of Cactus's bloodwork from her physical, her care team discovered that Cactus was in kidney failure and also had lymphoma, a type of blood cancer. We immediately began to discuss what our options were to treat Cactus. Kidney failure is common in older animals and while the condition is ultimately terminal, there are treatment options to slow its progression that keep an animal's quality of life high. Treatment for lymphoma is more difficult and the disease is ultimately terminal. Cactus's caretakers discussed with our veterinarian what symptoms they would see that indicated Cactus's lymphoma was progressing and what options there were to treat them. This helped them develop a plan for making sure that Cactus is able to live a full and enriching life where any symptoms she may experience from her conditions are monitored, treated, and controlled to the best of our ability. We don't know how much more time Cactus may have with us, but we want to make sure every minute is worth living.

From the giraffe to the Great Plains toad and the takin to the tarantula, every animal in our care receives the very best we have to give, no matter how big, small, scaly, furry, old, or young they may be. We love our animal residents and we are thankful to have a wonderful team to care for them and a community that cares about them as much as we do.