

This summer, I interned at the Nashville Zoo at Grassmere. I spent most of my time in the Critter Encounters exhibit, which is a petting zoo. The zoo's mission "is to inspire a culture of understanding and discovery of our natural world through conservation, innovation, and leadership." The zoo is relatively small, serving as home to around 400 species, and also young, having only been in operation for 13 years.

This summer was a time of expansion for the zoo; by the end of the summer, Critter Encounters incorporated more than 60 individual animals that represented 12 species: Galapagos and Sulcata tortoises, dromedary camels, goats, golden pheasants, snowy and spectacled owls, black throated magpie jays, plush crested jays, ocellated turkeys, an alpaca, and a Sicilian donkey.

During the summer, I worked four days a week over 12 weeks. Two days per week, I worked the opening schedule, from 6:30 to 3:30, and the other two days per week, I worked the closing schedule from 9:30 to 6:30. The opening shift included cleaning all of the areas in which the animals stay overnight, particularly from feces and leftover food, and feeding all of the animals, all of which took approximately 3 hours. When opening, I would clean the inside of the bird building while the keeper on duty cleaned the outside exhibit, allowing us to get much more done than one person could do. For example, most mornings, without a helper, a keeper can only clean the bird building, whereas when I helped, we often cleaned the bird building, cleaned and fed the Sulcata and Galapagos tortoises, fed the camels and goats, and cleaned the goat and camel areas. The closing shift consisted of spot cleaning, feeding all of the animals, and introducing new enrichment to the enclosures. Enrichment is considered to be anything new that is added to an exhibit to enrich the animals' lives; it could include anything from bamboo or balls to additional water troughs or different food placement.

During the day, after the opening duties and before closing, my responsibilities were quite different. I stayed in the public area and watched the animals and the people to ensure that all rules were followed and that everyone was safe. Watching the goats was particularly important, as one of our Saanen goats, Freyja, regularly jumped over the fences to visit the camels or eat the decorative plants outside of the exhibit. I was also available to provide general information and answer any of the guests' questions about Critter Encounters and the rest of the zoo. Watching the public area was probably my most important job, as the keepers often needed to leave the public area to attend meetings or run errands. Also, when closing, my main job was to watch the public area so that the keepers could do all of the other chores behind the scenes.

My other duties included bottle feeding our dromedary camels, which were only 3 months old when they were added to Critter Encounters in early June. They were initially fed 3 bottles daily but that gradually decreased when they turned 6 months old until they were weaned. The Critter Encounter keepers also care for the red kangaroos that are currently in holding until their exhibit opens. By the end of the summer, there were 15 kangaroos total, and their care consisted of feeding and cleaning in the morning and evening. At the beginning of the summer, when there were only 4 kangaroos, the duties also consisted of herding them into a building at night. This could take up to 30 or 40 minutes, as kangaroos are prone to capture myopathy, a condition that can cause sudden death in kangaroos after they have been captured and held for too long.

One day of my internship, I was also able to intern with the carnivore team, which takes care of the clouded leopards, red pandas, cougars, lynxes, and Bengal tigers at the Nashville Zoo. Their routine is very different from that of the Critter Encounters keepers, as they are not allowed any access to most of their animals, but it still mainly consisted of cleaning and feeding.

As a perk of my internship, I was also allowed close access to many of the animals. I was allowed to pet or feed kangaroos, giraffes, elephants, clouded leopards, tapirs, tamanduas, and giant anteaters, in addition to all of the animals inside Critter Encounters.

Unfortunately for our animals, but fortunately for me, we had a lot of interactions with the vet staff during my internship. Our Alpine kid, Pongo, had to have multiple surgeries and was eventually euthanized because his rumen wasn't moving. Purdita, another of our kids, had an abscess cut out because it was not healing correctly. Our camel Blue had an injured foot where he tried to stick it through the fence. Clyde, our 13-year-old goat, had to have electrolytes and a special lunch every day because he did not compete for food and therefore did not eat enough. He also had dental surgery because an abscessed tooth fell out, leaving a hole into which another tooth grew, resulting in him not being able to move his jaw. Lakota, our female snowy owl, was overgroomed by her mate while nesting, which caused a raw spot on her back that attracted maggots within 24 hours of its creation. Our 13-year-old alpaca, Neil, has arthritis and gets cosequin every day. His teeth also needed to be floated, or filed down, once every few months. Broderick and Calame, two of our Saanen goats, had a hoof fungus that had to be treated with an ultimately ineffective medicated shampoo for weeks before they got a sulfur-lime hoof bath. All of these situations required interactions with the vet staff and often with other keepers as well. I was able to watch many of these meetings and medical treatments, which taught me about the veterinary care of multiple exotic species of animals.

My zoo internship offered a unique mix of animal care and personal interactions, as I was in one of only three interactive areas in the zoo. In particular, this was my first internship or job with a major focus on interactions with the public, and it allowed me to develop my

communication skills. Previous to this, I had always considered myself bad with children, but I am now more comfortable with children and have fun with them.

During my internship, I learned about working with and caring for large animals. I have worked in a vet office on my breaks and learned how to work with, hold, and care for cats and dogs but large animals are entirely different. I learned how to restrain animals like donkeys and goats, how to read their behaviors, and how to teach them appropriate behaviors. Also, most of the animals with which I worked are large species that can very easily and unintentionally hurt people; one of the most important things I learned was how to work with and around these animals and how to prevent them from biting me, headbutting me, or generally fighting with me like another animal.

The best part of my internship was simply being around animals, especially such a wide range of animals as are present in Critter Encounters. It was particularly fun to watch the Galapagos tortoises get moved to their new exhibit; it took over two hours for them to walk approximately 150 feet, even with the temptation of cantaloupes. I greatly enjoyed the fact that I was able to work with and learn about such diverse animals, an experience which would be difficult to replicate in another internship. There was a lot of difficult manual labor, which was even less enjoyable when combined with 90-plus degree weather, but that is a requirement of working with animals.

I have volunteered, shadowed, and worked in various organizations and businesses during my summer and winter breaks, and this was the hardest one to leave. I have known for a long time that I wanted to work with animals, although more specific career goals still elude me. This is the first time I had worked with large animals and also the first time I had been so involved in the care and keeping of so many animals, and I absolutely loved it. This internship

confirmed my desire to work with animals in any capacity and has opened my mind to the possibilities of working with animals in a non-veterinary capacity, which has long been the main focus of my career goals.