

Career profile:

Over a series of tutorials, we will be focussing on different careers to get you thinking about the future

Zookeeper

Zookeepers are concerned with the welfare of animals kept in zoos, wildlife parks, aquariums and other animal attractions

As a zookeeper, you'll usually specialise in working with one type of animal, or in a particular section of the zoo, such as with great apes, penguins, African animals, reptiles or in an aviary. You'll grow to understand the animals in your care well and this will allow you to provide them with the best opportunity to thrive within captivity.

Another vital aspect of your role is your ability to engage with the public and educate them about the inhabitants of the zoo.

Responsibilities

As a zookeeper, you'll need to:

- keep animal enclosures clean, germ-free and safely secured
- prepare food such as pellets, fresh produce, meat or hay and administer medications
- observe animals and check for any signs of distress or ill health
- design, build and repair environments which are as close to natural habitats as possible
- come up with creative ideas for enrichment to keep animals active and interested in their environments
- work with other professionals such as vets
- educate visitors by sharing your animal knowledge through demonstrations with live animals, talks, tours, and visitor experiences
- keep daily detailed records of behaviour, eating habits, births, deaths and other events
- assist with breeding procedures and raising young animals, particularly with endangered species
- train animal behaviour to make feeding, medicating and monitoring easy and safe.

Salary

- Starting salaries for zoo keepers are between £12,000 and £14,000.
- Experienced zookeepers can earn between £16,000 and £20,000.
- Head keepers can earn higher salaries of up to £25,000 or more.

It's common to start this career on an unpaid internship, or short-term seasonal post at minimum wage. Caring for animals in captivity is incredibly expensive, and much of zoo income is reinvested in upkeep.

Salaries reflect the lack of difficulty that zoos have in recruiting keepers, with large numbers of applications for advertised posts.

Working hours

As a zookeeper, you'll need to be prepared to work year-round, and over weekends too. Animals require care and attention every day, including Christmas and other holidays.

You're likely to be part of a 'call-out' rota, meaning you'll need to be available outside of working hours in case of emergencies. Keepers often work unpaid overtime and need to be flexible about their days off, particularly if animals are unwell or births are expected.

What to expect

- You'll get the opportunity to build close and trusting relationships with animals and play a critical role in their conservation. Some keepers develop international reputations for their specialist knowledge.
- It will be necessary to work long hours, over weekends and with early starts. Your daily tasks can be repetitive and physically demanding, with a large part of your role dedicated to hosing, scrubbing, sweeping and disinfecting enclosures.
- In most animal collections, physical contact between keepers and animals is minimised. Over-handling or treating zoo animals like pets can change their behaviours, and impact on breeding success. Despite this, you may form strong bonds with the animals you care for, which can make it emotionally difficult when the animals are moved to other collections or reach the end of their lives.
- Zoos are found in urban and rural settings all around the country. You may need to relocate to progress or to specialise in work with particular animals.

Qualifications

Keepers are usually qualified to degree level, and often to postgraduate level.

A degree in zoology is the most direct route into this career but a degree in a life science or animal-related subject such as the following can also be advantageous:

- biology
- psychology
- animal science
- animal behaviour
- animal welfare.

Several universities offer specific postgraduate courses in zoo conservation or zoo biology which can give applicants an edge in a fiercely competitive profession.

Aspiring zookeepers can apply for apprenticeships or work their way into the profession by gaining transferable skills in other animal-focused roles.

Many zoos rely on animal lovers with a passion for conservation for financial and practical support. This includes volunteers, who provide care for the animals alongside paid staff.

The widespread interest in working with animals among people of all ages makes this a competitive area to break into. With a finite number of animal attractions worldwide, high numbers of willing volunteers and low turnover of paid staff, competition for vacancies is intense.

Skills

You will need:

- confidence in approaching and handling animals of all sizes
- scientific observation skills to monitor the wellbeing of animals in your care
- a high level of fitness, good health and the ability to sustain physical work for long periods in all weathers
- great communication skills and the confidence to talk to visitors of all ages, often in large groups
- a driving licence - this may be needed if you're working in a large zoo or safari park.

Career prospects

Most keepers will progress to positions of greater responsibility with time and experience, taking charge of larger groups of animals, or whole sections.

How quickly you can achieve this will depend on the size of the zoo, but progression is often slower than with other occupations and it can take years to move from one role to another. This is partly because staff turnover is low and so vacancies arise infrequently.

If you're looking for faster progression, you may need to seek opportunities at other zoos. You could progress to the position of senior keeper, head of section, head keeper or senior head keeper. You could also move into education or conservation research, advance to a managerial role within the zoo, or move into research.

It's likely the role of the keeper and the way zoos operate will continue to evolve in the future. As our understanding of animals deepens and we become more aware of the effects of them living in captivity, ethical and conservation questions are raised - potentially bringing about change.