



AAZK Member Resources: Animal Keeping as a Career

Produced by the AAZK Resource Committee



This document was produced to help answer common questions faced by people interested in becoming an animal keeper or related. The goal of this resource is to provide insight into what it means to be an animal keeper, and to provide additional resources to explore. This information is not intended to provide a definitive roadmap to becoming an animal keeper, but rather to serve as a starting point for those interested.

Are you interested in learning more about a career as an animal keeper? Great! You're in the right place. The American Association of Zookeepers is an organization dedicated to furthering the knowledge and expertise of the animal keeping profession, and that begins with learning what it means to be a keeper in the first place.

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What Exactly Does a Career as an Animal Keeper Look Like?

An **animal keeper**, or “**zoo keeper**” is a term used to describe an individual who cares for animals in zoological parks or aquariums. A career as a zookeeper offers a unique opportunity in the specialized and demanding profession of maintaining captive exotic animals for conservation, research, public education, and recreation. The care of captive exotic animals is very complex, and depending on your position may include work such as daily husbandry, diet preparation, enclosure maintenance, providing environmental enrichment, animal training, participation in veterinary procedures, public education, and more.

As you can see, animal keepers encompass many different responsibilities and even within the animal keeper field there are a lot of different titles and specialties such as:

- Animal Trainer
- Aquarist
- Aviculturist
- Biologist
- Commissary Keeper
- Herpetologist
- Mammalogist
- Veterinary Technician
- Wildlife Educator

How Do I Become an Animal Keeper?

Because zookeepers have such a specialized profession, some of that depends on your goals. The variety of roles means that you may take care of diverse animal collections - from mammals and birds to reptiles and amphibians to fish and invertebrates. Each position requires different skills and knowledge, but there is a common foundation for all of them. Let's take a look at the typical Career Path to becoming an animal keeper.

For a fun and informative source of advice, take a quick look on [How to Become an Animal Keeper](#) by San Diego Zoo Global's Rick Schwartz.¹

A great starting point to determine the qualifications you need for the types of positions you're interested in are the job postings themselves! Check out AAZK's [Job Listings](#) page to find current job postings - this will give you the best information of the different backgrounds employers are looking for, right from the source.

Some more specialized positions may have requirements that are difficult to acquire as you're just starting out - often, those requirements will require you to have some experience or certifications that you may only get at another animal keeping job first. In general, though, there are two requirements that are common for animal keeping jobs across the board - **Education** and **Experience**.

¹ Video used with permission from San Diego Zoo Global

Education

This varies by position, but most animal keeper jobs prefer you to at least have a Bachelor's Degree. Typically, Bachelor's Degrees are 4-year programs that help you focus your post-secondary education. Most employers are looking for a degree in an animal- or biology-related field. Here are some examples of common Bachelor's Degrees that give animal keepers a strong background, though there are many more:

- Animal Behavior
- Animal Science
- Biology
- Ecology
- Wildlife Management
- Zoology

There are many schools that offer degrees applicable to zookeeping. For a non-comprehensive list of schools that offer programs that have been helpful to AAZK members' careers, including some schools with zookeeping or exotic animal management degrees, explore AAZK's [College Degree Programs](#) page. There are other schools and programs that may set you up for success as an animal keeper, so be sure to explore as many options as possible to find the right fit for you.

Keep in mind, animal keeping is an incredibly competitive career field. Although there may be some positions that do not require a Bachelor's Degree, be aware that there will likely be applicants who do have a Bachelor's. It may not be necessary to get a degree, but it can definitely be helpful when competing against others who have one.

Experience

When applying for a position as an animal keeper, you'll see that even most entry level positions ask for a minimum of 6 months experience (often more). This can be confusing - how are you supposed to get experience if you need experience to get hired?

Often, early animal keepers gain experience through **volunteering** and **internships**. These positions give you a taste of what to expect in this career field, and provide experience that will help you in your future as an animal keeper.

Volunteer

Volunteering allows you to develop skills, but is often more driven by a desire to help out. Volunteers are unpaid, and many volunteer positions are held by people with careers outside of the animal keeping field. Typically, volunteering does not require a full work week every week. You may be able to volunteer a few times a week, once a week, or even once a month depending on the facility! Of course, the more often you can volunteer the more you will learn and the quicker you will gain experience. Many zoos have a section on their website where they list volunteer opportunities and a way to reach out about volunteering.

Internships

Internships are positions that are designed to give people testing out the field practical experience. Most internships are unpaid, though some do offer stipends or housing. Internships often require a more concrete time commitment - a certain amount of hours dedicated per week for a long length of time (often 3 - 6 months). During internships, you will often work alongside keepers as they perform their daily duties and be able to gain an incredible amount of insight into the daily role of an animal keeper.

There are many different opportunities to volunteer and intern! Look at your local animal facilities to see if they're currently accepting interns or volunteers. Some places to check out include:

- Zoos
- Aquariums
- Nature Centers
- Animal Shelters
- Veterinary Offices
- Wildlife Rehabilitators

Once you feel as though you have the required combination of education and experience, compile them into a resume and start applying! AAZK members have access to example resumes and cover letters to help them prepare application materials.

Job Search

There are many different places to look when trying to apply for a position, whether it be an internship, seasonal position, or full time job. Some facilities list openings on their website with specific instructions to apply directly to them, or you may be directed to an employment page beyond the facility (sometimes the case for facilities operated by a city, state, or federal government). Be sure to read all of the directions carefully and follow them - the application process may vary from facility to facility, but you want to be sure you're doing it right.

There are some large job boards that AAZK members often use to look for positions from multiple facilities at once:

- [AAZK Job Board](#)
- [Association of Zoos & Aquariums \(AZA\) Job Board](#)
- [Zoological Association of America \(ZAA\) Job Board](#)

Once you have applied for a position, be sure to check out a sample list of interview questions compiled for AAZK members. Although the questions you are asked in an interview will vary, this list will provide an idea of the types of questions that animal keepers are often asked and give you a starting point to prepare from.

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