

## **ZOO DAYS!**

*by Caitlin Letts*

"How was your day?" my mom asks. "Pretty good, didn't lose any birds," is my usual reply. This may sound a little strange to you, but for a volunteer at the Oregon Zoo, it's perfectly normal. I started my first volunteer job at the zoo two years ago. As a homeschooled student, I was available during the day, during the school year, to participate in a program called Zoomobile. This program involves taking various animals, such as opossums, snakes, ferrets, owls, etc. to kindergarten through second grade classrooms, talking about the animals and, in most cases, letting the children touch the animals.

Unfortunately, things don't always go exactly as planned, so we have to be prepared for 'unusual' events. For instance, one day the hot water bottles for the snakes were a little too warm. This has the unfortunate effect of making the snakes more active. So, while I was standing there talking to the kids about what a gopher snake eats, the gopher snake was busy tying my hands together with itself. It took a second volunteer, and a lot of effort, to get my hands free, much to the amusement of the kids.

Working on a Zoomobile team has given me incredible learning opportunities. I have learned not only the basic facts about all the animals, but also how to care for them, how to look for signs of sickness or injury, how to handle different species, and what goes on behind the scenes at the zoo. I've also gained experience in public speaking, working as a team, and dealing with unexpected problems quickly and without panicking. Sometimes the animals just don't want to cooperate, but there's nothing you can do about it and the show must go on!

Unfortunately for me, Zoomobile can only run during the school year, so I looked for a summer volunteer opportunity. That's how I discovered the Birds of Prey Program, or BOP. BOP is made up of about forty volunteers, many of them teenagers like me, fewer than ten staff people, and eighteen birds of prey. The birds range from a tiny American Kestrel Falcon to a 20 lb. Andean Condor. It takes about forty hours of training and learning basic ornithology and facts about the BOP birds, before you're allowed to even touch a bird. The birds are separated into different levels. Once trained for a certain level you can start learning to handle all the birds at that level.

Now, you may think this sounds like a great job. You go in and you get to handle hawks and owls. However, there's a lot more to it than that. Every day all the birds' enclosures have to be hosed out, the birds' food has to be prepared and weighed, and all the birds need to get some sort of enrichment. Enrichment is kind of like extra-curricular activity. It's to keep their lives interesting, because they can't all be trained every day, and some of them can't fly, and therefore don't get much exercise. The enrichment is usually some sort of toy or change in their environment. Some birds may get a ball to play with, a pinecone with some of their food smeared on it, or we might give them some browse (leaves and branches they can tear apart and play with) or move their water bowl and perches around. Just something to make their lives more interesting.

During the summer there is a BOP show held three times every day. Most of the birds get to be in the show, and most of those get to fly in the show. That's where losing a bird comes in. Every now and then a bird will actually fly off, but they have always come back. All of the birds are imprinted or have some injury that would make it impossible for them to survive in the wild. Usually they will just sit in a nearby tree until they get hungry enough to fly down.

Sometimes the birds are a little slow to fly, and Chinook, the Bald Eagle, has a tendency to "lighten the load" before she flies. One day, Chinook wasn't flying, so they decided to send a staff member out to the perch to call her, thinking the familiar face might help. Well, it did. As soon as Chinook saw the staff person, she lightened her load. To the amusement of all the backstage volunteers, the announcer

made a comment about how Chinook often has that reaction to seeing that particular staff member!

One of the challenges of working at the zoo is the need to give a good impression to all the audience members, no matter what. Once, when calling the raven, Stark, to a perch, I didn't pull my hand back fast enough, and along with his food he grabbed a good chunk of my finger. A little girl, about 5 years old, not seeing what had happened, decided to ask me whether or not the birds could hurt someone. I just stood there and very politely told her that they could, but usually don't, all the while holding my finger so she couldn't see the blood.

Most incidents are not so traumatic. For instance, one day during the bird show one of the staff made an unintentional comment about Eurasian Eagle Owls being roughly the size of two Hooters (the name of the our Great Horned Owl). That got a good laugh from all the volunteers backstage!

The summer bird shows are an incredibly intense experience. I never knew that so much could be done in a half hour. Just watching the show you would have no idea that backstage there are volunteers getting food ready, working the sound system, getting birds in position - in short, utter chaos! That is, until we get used to it.

When I did my first show I had no idea what to expect. The staff assigned me some jobs and told me how to do them, and when, but I still was totally confused. It was kind of like sink or swim. We got thrown in and were expected to figure out where we were supposed to be, and when. Of course, all the other volunteers were there to help us figure it out, but once the show started we were mostly on our own. And we were having the time of our lives! Since every day we work with new people it takes a little bit of adjustment each time, but by the third show of the day, we are always working as a team. Now everyone does what they're supposed to, and if someone makes a mistake, someone else will help fix it.

I have made some very close friendships, too. When we're on lunch break, either at BOP or Zoomobile, we always have a great time, laughing and joking and getting to know each other. Then, when we go back to work we work even better together. My friends aren't all human either. The animals are, for the most part, very friendly, and the birds will even form special friendships with volunteers they like. I am friends with a Harris Hawk named Sonora, I don't know why she decided to like me, but she did. When I go to the zoo I always look forward to seeing her as well as seeing my human friends.

Working at the zoo has been one of the best experiences I've had. I have learned more from spending two years working with volunteers at the zoo than I did in my seven or eight years of school. I have learned responsibility, independence, and that it is not beneath anyone's dignity to scrub out an animal's enclosure. And the people I have had the chance to work with are amazing, from high school and college students to preschool teachers and veterinarians. Regardless of all the volunteers' varied outside interests or careers, something we all have in common is a love of animals.

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