



## JOSH KELLER HEADKEEPER-NORTH AMERICA/ POLAR FRONTIER

### 1. When did you begin working at the Columbus Zoo?

I began in Animal Care the summer of 2012 as an intern in the Congo Expedition department. Before that, I also worked at Zoombezi Bay in Food and Beverage. After completing my first internship, I did another one the following year in 2013 in the Australia and the Islands region. Then, in 2014, I was an Animal Care seasonal team member in the Congo Expedition and Australia and the Islands regions, and the Children's Zoo Barn. I accepted a job as a full-time keeper in the Australia and the Islands department in 2014. I moved a year later to the North America department and accepted the job as Headkeeper of North America in 2021.

### 2. What education and animal experiences helped you become a zookeeper?

In addition to the experience I gained from my internships at the Columbus Zoo, I have a bachelor's degree in Zoology from Miami University of Ohio.

### 3. What skills are the most important in your job?

It is important to have a willingness to learn, grow, and work as a team. This can be a very demanding job both physically and emotionally. Beyond the classroom, you learn many skills from your co-workers and doing the experiences yourself.

### 4. What is a typical day for your current position?

My current position as Headkeeper means that on top of my normal zookeeper duties, I also hire/mentor our interns, seasonals and Zoo School students in our region. My day starts off with our morning meeting, where we go over what needs done for the day and are assigned which animals we will be working with. After that, I check on the animals and begin preparing their diets. Then, I go to each animal/habitat and clean, feed, provide enrichment, and monitor for any behavioral or medical changes. Additionally, there are some species that I also help train. This usually takes up the morning and after lunch, my job usually consists of helping our interns with their quizzes or projects, observing seasonal training projects, or any other committee/administrative region tasks I may need to do. Before taking this role, my afternoons usually consisted of training projects or other projects throughout the region.

### 5. What advice would you give me to help me become a zookeeper?

Zookeeping jobs are very competitive, especially at the larger zoos. Many people will do unpaid internships, years of seasonal work, and may even take a zookeeping job out of state before they can finally work at their "dream" zoo. The biggest advice is work hard, be a team player, and do not give up.

### 6. How does this career impact your personal and lifestyle choices?

This career can have a big impact on your personal life. The animals need to be taken care of 365 days a year, which means there are always zookeepers working. Many zookeepers will not have normal weekend days off (Saturday/Sunday) or if they do, it will be much later in their careers. There are also times when an animal may require medical treatment or a birth occurs that you will need to watch, which may mean you are working weird hours (overnight shifts) or picking up extra hours on your weekends. The animals need to be taken care of on the holidays, too, so many keepers end up working on the major holidays, which means they are unable to spend as much time with their families. All in all, this is a very rewarding career, but it is one that can mean a lot of sacrifices for your personal life if you let it.

### 7. What is the hardest part of your job?

One of the hardest parts of the job is definitely losing an animal you care deeply about. The hardest part of my current job is not having enough time in my day. There is always something that I want to do to either improve the lives of the animals or the lives of the staff and those who work with the animals. Unfortunately, time is generally the limiting factor and trying to juggle everything I want to do can be very difficult.

### 8. What is the best part of your job?

The best part of the job is being able to form connections with the animals you work with. They become like part of your family and being able to help an animal work through a difficult situation (medical issue, scary situation) because of the trust you build with them is very rewarding. This is why I enjoy training our animals so much! A lot of this trust can be built through a training relationship.

### 9. Does the work you do at the Zoo impact the animals around the world?

While the work I do does not directly impact the animals around the world, I believe the animals at the Columbus Zoo help make people care about the animals around the world. Many people will never be able to leave the country and see animals in their native ranges, but by coming to the Zoo, they can gain an appreciation and wonder about wildlife. In turn, I hope they will go on to see how they can help these animals' wild counterparts.

### 10. What is the most important thing you do for the well-being of the animals in your care?

I think training is one of the most important things we can do for the animals in our care. There are so many attributes to training, whether it be training for a voluntary medical procedure, training to improve mental wellbeing, or even training to aid in taking care of their habitat. All of these can contribute to the overall wellbeing of an animal.

# ZOO KEEPER INTERVIEWS

