



Behind the Scenes: ZooAmerica Naturalists Tell All

The jobs of the naturalists at **ZooAmerica** North American Wildlife Park are among the most interesting careers in Hershey, Pennsylvania. Here are just a few of the humans you might run into on your next visit:

Troy Stump

Title: Director

Joined the Zoo: When it officially became **ZooAmerica**, on January 1, 1978.

What I Do: I'm in the Zoo's administrative department. I oversee the maintenance and development of the facility and the development of the staff, and I ensure that the components of education, conservation, recreation and research are included in our mission and programs so that we meet the standards established by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA). I also ensure that we meet all governmental regulations. And, of course, I make sure we always exceed the expectations of our guests.

What Makes the Zoo Special: Its North American theme.

Favorite Animal and Why: My favorite is Hoover, our very old snowy owl. He's on exhibit now, but we used to include him in our education programs, and we often used him for media opportunities. He was great to work with and is a very impressive species with unique adaptations to his environment.

Strangest Animal Encounter: I was assisting our veterinarian, who was getting a biopsy of the skin of one of our bears. After we tranquilized the bear, he went to sleep . . . or so we thought. We went in the exhibit, removed a small section of skin and stitched the area. When we got up to leave the exhibit, the bear got up as well . . . and just walked the other way!

Fondest Memory: I love winter mornings after a fresh snow. Sometimes the ice is thick on the vegetation and the sun is shining and the scene is amazing. Seeing the animals on the fresh snow on a winter morning is about as good as it gets.

Dale Snyder

Title: General Curator

Joined the Zoo: On April 3, 1978.

What I Do: I'm responsible for the daily workings of **ZooAmerica**. I'm the liaison with veterinarians, security, utility and maintenance, and most of all with the Animal Care staff, which I'm directly responsible for.

What Makes the Zoo Special: It allows you to see a variety of animals that are native to North America in a setting that's both pleasing and easy to navigate. Most of the Zoo can be viewed in about an hour. It's also set up by habitats, so guests can enjoy swamp, desert, woodland, prairie and tundra species.

Favorite Animal and Why: I've come in contact with many animals that have become special to me in my years at the Zoo, but my all-time favorite species are raccoons. They're usually busy and very mischievous.

Strangest Animal Encounter: I had to milk a tiny bat that had mastitis.

Fondest Memory: I worked with a young otter pup that was sent to us after its upper lip had been cut off in a run-in with a boat rudder. The baby otter had to be bottle-fed many times a day. As it got a bit older, plastic surgeons from the Penn State Milton S. Hershey Medical Center reconstructed its upper lip. The animal was eventually released back into the wild.

Elaine Gruin

Title: Curator of Education

Joined the Zoo: In 1978. I took time off after the birth of my first son in 1987 and returned in 1992.

What I Do: I'm responsible for all aspects of the Education department, which includes onsite programs and tours; outreach presentations; and special programs like ZooCamp, pre-school programs and Scout Days. We have a separate collection of animals that are used for educational programming, and my department is responsible for their daily care and training.

What Makes the Zoo Special: The North American theme makes it very unique, and it's important in the curriculum of our schools. Plus, we have a small staff and we're almost like family.

Favorite Animal and Why: I usually say the peregrine falcon, because it has such a good story to tell. The peregrine falcon was once on the Endangered Species list, but was removed because of the partnership of many groups that worked together to reintroduce the birds back into the wild. But I like roadrunners, too. They're such unusual birds and have a curious nature.

Strangest Animal Encounter: We were trying to catch a green iguana in the trees of the elk exhibit. Somehow this lizard appeared there one summer and was spotted every few days by our guests. We finally did make a successful capture, but the entire process

was hilarious. This green iguana was not part of our animal collection. I can only assume that it was a pet that was no longer wanted and was released near the Zoo by someone thinking that it would get a good home. After capturing it, we sent it to a wildlife rehabilitator.

Fondest Memory: Among my favorite memories would be ringtail, pallid bat, roadrunner, coati and tortoise births. Or meeting my future husband on his first day of work at the Zoo and wondering, “What in the world did they hire now?”

Tim Becker

Title: Naturalist

Joined the Zoo: In 1981.

What I Do: I’m in charge of taking care of animals in the Big Sky Country and part of the Northlands.

What Makes the Zoo Special: For me, it’s all the interesting people I get to meet and work with. It’s a great place for families to visit and see wildlife up close.

Favorite Animal and Why: My favorites to watch are the prairie dogs because they’re so busy and comical.

Strangest Animal Encounter: The strangest things occur when you’re trying to catch an animal. Tackling deer, jumping on alligators and being vomited on by vultures are a few of the high points.

Fondest Memory: I like the times I got to hand-raise young animals, such as bobcats, elk calves and snowy owl chicks.

Tal Wenrich

Title: Naturalist

Joined the Zoo: In 1988.

What I Do: I take care of all the animals and exhibits in the Eastern Woodlands and half of the Northlands sections of the zoo.

What Makes the Zoo Special: We have a staff that shares the same passion about wildlife.

Favorite Animal and Why: Butch, the black bear, is my favorite – because he’s a dork like me. He likes to sit on his back sometimes and scratches his belly. He reminds me of a couch potato sitting and watching TV.

Strangest Animal Encounter: We hand-raised Hoover, the snowy owl. “Experts” told us we would never have snowy owl babies. However, we proved them wrong. Not only did we hatch babies, but we also set out to raise them ourselves. When we started hand-raising the babies, Hoover became very friendly and quickly became a hit among the keepers. When he took one of his maiden flights, to my surprise he flew right at me . . . and landed on my shoulder, where he started begging for food.

Fondest Memory: We hatched baby golden eagles here at **ZooAmerica** and helped to release them back into the wild. Eagles began coming back to areas where they were missing for many decades. We released upwards of a dozen eagles back into the wild.

Patrick McCann

Title: Naturalist

Joined the Zoo: In 1991.

What I Do: I'm in charge of the Southern Swamps, as well as the grounds and horticulture throughout the Zoo.

What Makes the Zoo Special: I'm really proud of the native animals and the native plant collection we've developed.

Favorite Animal and Why: I love the American alligator and crocodile. I'm impressed by and respectful of their huge size and habits in nature, but I'm also envious of their slow, tropical lifestyle.

Strangest Animal Encounter: An alligator cracked the exhibit glass with its head minutes before the start of our Halloween event, **Creatures of the Night**. He had never done anything like that before, so it surprised us all. We frantically ran around and fixed things up and stationed people by the exhibit as a precaution. The event went on like planned, and the next morning the glass company repaired the damages.

Fondest Memory: I remember building a giant "snow snake" during one of the blizzards. We knew that there had to be something we could do with all of that snow, so we fashioned a large, 20-foot snow snake near the entrance to the Southern Swamps building. The weather stayed cold and the "sculpture" turned to ice. It greeted guests for the next three weeks.

Natalie Belfanti

Title: Education Specialist

Joined the Zoo: In 1999.

What I Do: I do on-site and off-site educational programs and ZooCamp, and I'm responsible for the daily care and maintenance of the Education animals.

What Makes the Zoo Special: It focuses on North American animals.

Favorite Animal and Why: I really like Cosmo, a barn owl in the Education department. He has an interesting story to tell. Barn owls can hear better than any bird in the world. They can catch their prey without even seeing it, just by using their hearing. Many of their features help to ensure that sound travels directly to their ears, including the arrangement of their feathers and the "comb" on their middle talon. Also, Cosmo is 20 years old, and barn owls in the wild may only live five or six years.

Strangest Animal Encounter: This may not be the strangest animal encounter, but kids seem to think it's the funniest. Almost every time I use an alligator for a program, it pees all over me! The kids think that's hilarious and usually remember it for a while.

Fondest Memory: I loved when I did my first outreach program for a school and received a positive evaluation. All of the animals behaved, I didn't get lost on my way to the school, and I received great comments from the teachers. It was the first time I went out on my own, so I was very pleased.

Katie Fessler

Title: Naturalist

Joined the Zoo: In 2000.

What I Do: I work in The Great Southwest building, where I take care of various mammals, birds, amphibians, reptiles and invertebrates. I also help with animal acquisitions and disquisitions; assist with veterinary care; and feed, clean, train and enrich the animals. In addition, I train the part-time staff on how to care for the animals.

What Makes the Zoo Special: Because we're a small zoo, everyone and everything is very close-knit. I've been able to work with all the animals in the Zoo. There's a wealth of information among our staff, and everyone is always willing to help each other out.

Favorite Animal and Why: I've never been able to pick just one favorite . . . they all have unique qualities! The roadrunners entertain me, and the gila monsters impress me. The tortoises always make me smile, and the swift foxes keep me on my toes.

Strangest Animal Encounter: Oliver, an opossum that was part of our Education department, surprised me when he climbed up my shoulder and got really close to my ear . . . and just nuzzled next to me. The Education staff told me he was friendly, but I never knew an opossum would cuddle!

Fondest Memory: Births at the Zoo are special because they demonstrate that the animals are doing well here. Animals have to be healthy and stress-free enough to mate and produce successful young. Therefore, the births of the three bobcats and vampire bat baby in 2008 in my area have been particularly special to me.

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