

Here Kitty, Kitty: The Life of Big Cat Keeper

Bonnie VanEllen is a cat person. Has been ever since she was a little girl growing up in the countryside, where she kept a whole barn of them. But as VanEllen grew bigger, so did the cats. Now she's caretaker to two lions, two leopards, and a tiger.

VanEllen has been the zookeeper in charge of the big cats at the Blank Park Zoo in Des Moines, Iowa for nine years, and a big cat keeper for three more besides. Her day starts at 7 a.m., long before the zoo opens at 10 a.m., to check on the animals; making sure they are all healthy and safe in their sleeping enclosures before moving them on to exhibit for the day. And then there's cleaning. "It's very hard work on your feet. It's not just playing," VanEllen, 38, says. "Scooping, shoveling, hosing; it doesn't smell good. You get used to your own [exhibit's] smell, but I can hardly handle the emu."

Zookeepers have to prepare their animals' diets. Without the goat and deer VanEllen's charges might enjoy in the wild, that means a mix of chicken, beef, rabbit, and horse for the large cats, with the occasional bone, deer hide, or blood popsicle to gnaw on as a treat. Zookeepers are also expected to give presentations for zoo visitors. VanEllen occasionally works late for the weekly summer Zoo Brews, an after hours event held at the zoo that incorporates three bars and live music to the zoo experience for those over 21 when nocturnal animals like the leopards are more active. One section of the zoo has the friendlier animals roaming freely; it's VanEllen's responsibility to usher the animals back to their enclosures at the end of the night, and they don't always want to go. "One wallaby in particular needed to be removed off premises during Zoo Brews because he would gather a crowd around him," she says. He liked to be petted.

VanEllen also plays a big role in keeping her animals healthy, working with the three qualified vets Blank keeps on staff. VanEllen's favorite memory from working at Blank was the husbandry training she participated in with the lions. Husbandry may sound like a breeding program, but its main goal is to establish a relationship between the animal, the keeper, and the vet - mainly through a lot of touch. This helps the animal feel comfortable going through routine medical exams. "Bonnie is amazing with training," says Sara Brock, a Drake University intern at Blank who has worked with VanEllen during research for her university major project on leopards. "She's even helped train the male lion to accept anesthesia without freaking out." Deuce, the male, is the last of three in Blank's original pride. "Our big male lion is very sweet and sensitive," VanEllen says. "People think he's ferocious and loud, but he's a precious little boy."

VanEllen works with several other animals at the zoo besides the big cats, including the primates. Compared to the silly, active, and sometimes destructive monkeys, she describes the big cats as more relaxed, with very serious temperaments. She has had to learn to read body language to know when the animals are in a bad mood; large cats, like domestics, will flick their tails when worked up or annoyed. "I wouldn't say [our relationship is] friendly; everyone respects the fences...we [the keepers] spend more time here than at home. They trust us to keep them safe and secure, and we trust them to make our lives easier and cooperate," VanEllen says.

VanEllen got her start twelve years ago at the Houston Zoo, caring for wolves, bears, and yes, big cats. At that time, there weren't degree programs for zoo keeping. VanEllen's coworkers came from a variety of backgrounds, including an ex-hairdresser. Now there are zoo-keeping schools in Florida and California, but VanEllen earned her degree from Iowa State

in Fishery and Wildlife Biology. However, she most attributes getting her job to an internship she had at a tiger refuge in Arkansas. The refuge was established by a local woman quite by accident. There's a saying that if you feed a stray cat, you'll never get it to leave. As VanEllen put it, "It seems if you take in one tiger, people will keep bringing you more." The refuge lacked consistent funding and was supported through a combination of livestock donations from farmers and roadkill. "Looking back, it was a pretty scary situation," VanEllen says. But it gave her her first experience with big cats.

When VanEllen heads home after the zoo closes its gates at 4 p.m., she leaves the big cats behind to return to her own two pet cats, domestic shorthairs named Kiki and Dot. VanEllen treasures her relationships with these graceful animals in her life, both large and small.