

LEVELED BOOK • Q

# Zookeeping



An Interview with Jeff Polcen  
Conducted by Kathie Lester

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Main entrance to the Cleveland Metroparks Zoo

Jeff Polcen is a lead zookeeper at the Cleveland Metroparks Zoo.

**Interviewer:** How did you become interested in being a zookeeper?

**Jeff:** I was working for the Metroparks (the city park system in Cleveland, Ohio) at the stables when I heard about a position at the zoo. I started working at the Birds of the World building and later transferred to the African animal area, where I've been for 17 years. Growing up on a farm, I've always liked working with hoofed animals. Cows and horses are related to giraffes and zebras, so their behaviors and body structure are similar. But there are also a lot of interesting differences. I learn new things every day.



Jeff Polcen scratches a friendly zebra behind the ears.

**Interviewer: What skills do you need?**

**Jeff:** Observation is the most important skill. You have to be able to look at a group of animals and figure out what's happening. Maybe they're getting sick, or one is going to give birth, or they're not all getting along. These are wild animals that can be dangerous, so you need to use a lot of common sense.



**Interviewer:** Which kinds of animals are you responsible for?

**Jeff:** I'm a lead keeper—a working supervisor—over our African savannah and the rhino/monkey island area. I oversee many animals, including giraffes, zebras, antelope, ostriches, vultures, and native African birds. We run mixed species exhibits, where we have birds and mammals that are safe together in the same yard.



Jeff cares for zebras as well as many other animals.



This adult female giraffe, named Bridgit, stands with her son Mac. She is one of only about 50 Masai giraffes in North America.

**Interviewer:** What do you like most about your job?

**Jeff:** I get to work independently without someone telling me what to do. Everyone finds the position they enjoy most in the zoo business. Some people enjoy working with the monkeys or birds. The hoofed animals are my favorites. We've had many giraffe babies born here, and I enjoy working with them.

**Interviewer:** Do you come to care a lot about each animal, as you would with a pet?

**Jeff:** It's hard to avoid getting attached to certain animals. Zoo care has progressed a lot, so animals live longer than they used to. I see illness and other problems developing as an animal gets older, and I have to make decisions about how to care for an older animal. Sometimes the animal is suffering, and it's best to put it to sleep.



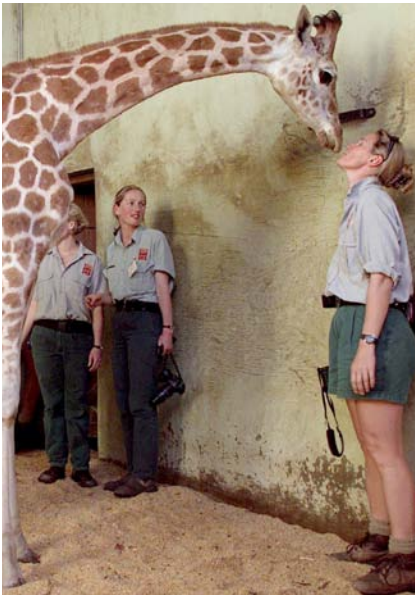
Bridgit when she was eighteen years old

**Interviewer:** What's the scariest thing that's ever happened to you?

**Jeff:** I was run over by a giraffe. We were bringing them in, and one of the females wheeled around and started running back toward me. I barely had time to turn around and try to get out of the way, but she ran into me, over me, on me.

**Interviewer:** Were you injured?

**Jeff:** A little, but mainly just sore. I got stepped on a few times, but nothing major.



**Interviewer:**  
How much does a giraffe weigh?

**Jeff:** A giraffe weighs 1,500 to 2,500 pounds (680 to 1,134 kilograms), depending on whether it's male or female.

Giraffes are huge!





A group of giraffes

**Interviewer:** How do you manage a group of giraffes? When you move them, do you move them one at a time?

**Jeff:** No. Most of the hoofed stock are herd animals—they do everything as a group. Once you teach them a certain routine, they'll keep doing that. As a keeper you have to follow a routine, because changing it confuses them. For example, each giraffe knows which stall to go into. We give orders with our voices, and sometimes we'll use a long stick to tap them; it lets us keep a safe distance.

**Interviewer:** How do you provide medical care? If you have to work on a large animal, do you give it a shot so that it sleeps while you work on it?

**Jeff:** On most of the big animals, the vets use a blowpipe or an air gun to put them under anesthesia. If it's a long enough procedure, they keep the animals under with gas. Putting a giraffe under anesthesia is risky, so we want to make sure it's really necessary. We need to be sure we have all the necessary people and equipment in case complications arise.



A zookeeper trains a rhinoceros to receive a shot.

Monitoring a giraffe's health is a big job.



**Interviewer:** What happens to a giraffe when you anesthetize it?

**Jeff:** We have to watch how they go down so they don't hit their heads. When they're lying on their side, they might have trouble breathing, because they're so heavy. Sometimes the anesthesia makes them have difficulty moving the muscles in their necks. We have to think about things carefully before we do procedures.



This young giraffe is resting.

**Interviewer:** Do they ever lie down?

**Jeff:** Yes—every night. They lie with their legs tucked under them. They don't sleep for hours like we would; they take naps for ten to fifteen minutes at a time, and then they get up again.

**Interviewer:** Are their heads up?

**Jeff:** They often lay their head on their hip if they want to go into a deep sleep.

**Interviewer:** Oh—like curled. It must be quite a sight.

**Jeff:** Yes—it's neat to see them all lying down when I arrive in the morning.

**Interviewer:** Can you think of something funny that's happened to you working at the zoo?

**Jeff:** A few years ago, we had ostriches outside in the winter. They were in an icy patch of the yard, and I was trying to get them in. They had lain down, but it was too slippery to get back up. There was a spot along the doorway that had melted enough to walk on. I sat with my back against the fence and put my feet on each ostrich and pushed it like a hockey puck across the ice. They slid pretty well over to the thawed area, and then I prodded them to where they could get up and I was able to walk them in.



Ostriches





A mother ostrich protects her young.

**Interviewer: Aren't ostriches dangerous?**

**Jeff:** The males can be during breeding season. Their kick has the potential to kill, but the females are usually pretty good. They can be a challenge sometimes, but it depends on how you work with them and what kind of relationship you build with them. Every animal can be dangerous. But that's where those observational skills come in. You have to watch what's going on so you know when to get out of the area. All the animals have different personalities.

**Interviewer:** What do you think about keeping animals in cages?

**Jeff:** I think we've come a long way from iron bars—most of our exhibits are interactive now. We work hard to allow animals natural behaviors that keep them from getting bored. The exhibit yards are bigger and include what we call “furniture,” like rocks and logs. Most zoos have a team of people who work on developing interesting environments for the animals. Zoos share ideas, and there are zoo magazines that say “we tested such and such with this animal and it worked out well.” There's a good network among animal-care workers.



Pandas play on some exhibit “furniture.”



An adult slender-horned gazelle

**Interviewer:** What's the most difficult animal you care for, and why?

**Jeff:** We have a type of animal called the slender-horned gazelle, native to North Africa. There aren't many of them in captivity and they're inbred, which means they've had babies with their close relatives. So their immune system is not as good as it should be, and they're more likely to get common infections. They're easy to manage, but they have medical problems sometimes.

**Interviewer:** What's the most dangerous animal you care for?

**Jeff:** Any of the hoofed animals. Giraffes are the most dangerous—their kick can be the worst. Right now I have four of them. We've had as many as eight, including the calves.



A giraffe roams through its exhibit.





A female giraffe with a baby in a birthing stall. Since the baby falls 1.8 meters (6 ft) when it is born, the bottom of the stall is filled with sand and then covered with straw to cushion the fall.

**Interviewer:** Do you have any special stories or moments to share?

**Jeff:** We had to deliver a giraffe calf back in 1998. This was the mom's third or fourth pregnancy, but she was having trouble with this one. The calf wasn't moving through the birth canal. I reached inside her and helped pull the calf until the head was out. Then the vet and I pulled her out the rest of the way. The calf must have had her oxygen cut off in the birth canal, but we got her breathing.



The baby didn't want to nurse for a few days. We kept her with the mom, but we tube fed her. Then on the third day she started nursing on her own, and she turned out to be a really nice animal. She bonded with us, too, so she was really easy to handle. She's in Kansas City, and she's one of their best giraffes. She's almost four years old now.



A young giraffe is fed by a zookeeper.

**Interviewer:** You found out that if you handle a baby that much at the beginning, it becomes much more manageable. Why don't you work with all of the babies that way to develop them into that kind of an easy-to-handle animal?

**Jeff:** We don't do any hand raising unless we absolutely have to. The mother-reared animal is better because it knows how to behave like the animal it is. Animals that are human-oriented forget to act like a zebra or a giraffe.



This baby giraffe runs around its new surroundings.



Jeff hand-feeds a friendly giraffe.

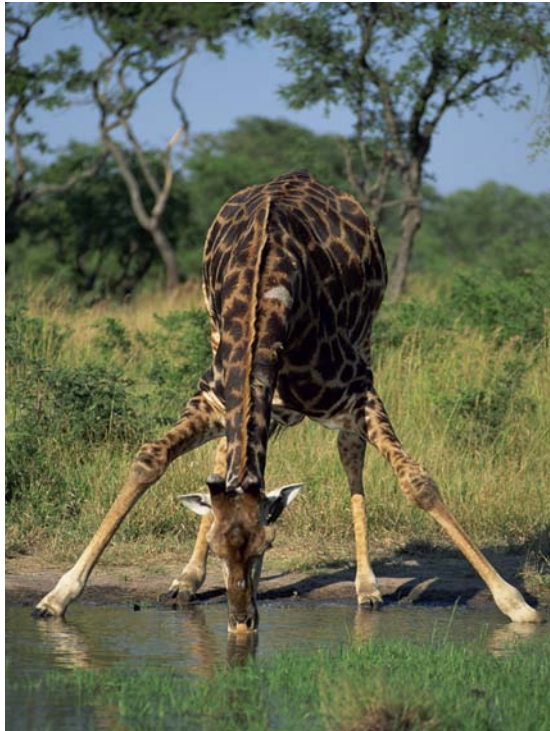
**Interviewer:** Do you see yourself staying in this job for the rest of your working life?

**Jeff:** I would say so. I've had a lot of successes here, and there's still a lot I want to accomplish. Besides, I find caring for these animals very satisfying, interesting, and challenging.

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Giraffes usually eat standing up, but occasionally they need to bend down to drink. They take a long time to slowly inch down and spread their long legs for balance. In the wild, this puts them in a very vulnerable position.



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*Word Count: 1,498*



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