

Animal Care/Service Worker

Snapshot

Career Cluster(s): Agriculture, Food & Natural Resources; Hospitality & Tourism

Interests: Training and grooming animals; spending time outdoors; solving problems; communicating with people

Earnings (Yearly Average): \$24,990

Employment & Outlook: Much Faster Than Average Growth Expected

OVERVIEW

Sphere of Work

Animal care and service workers tend to the needs of mammals, birds, fish, amphibians, and reptiles for various nonprofit organizations, research facilities, and private businesses, as well as individuals. Animal caretaking encompasses many job titles and occupational specialties, including trainers, groomers, pet sitters, aquarists, zookeepers or animal keepers, veterinary assistants, and attendants in animal shelters, pet shops, and kennels. Being an animal caretaker of any stripe can also lend itself to crossover into fields such as humane education, which aims to instill in children a respect for animals, the environment, and other people. There are opportunities



Keeper feeding a kangaroo. Photo via iStock.com/AzmanL. [Used under license.]

for entrepreneurship in this area, as pet ownership is at an all-time high, and animal owners need qualified individuals to tend to them.

Work Environment

Animal caretakers work in kennels, zoos, pet stores, shelters, animal hospitals, wild-life sanctuaries, horse stables, grooming salons, and animal laboratories. Pet sitters usually attend to animals in private residences. Some caretakers travel between client homes or with their animals to special shows. Although some caretakers are limited to working either outside or inside, most divide their time between indoor and outdoor locations. Flexible schedules are common, and hours might include nights, evenings, weekends, and/or holiday shifts. Humane educators may travel to schools and learning centers to engage with children in group settings.

Occupation Interest

Animal caretaker positions attract people who respect animals and understand their specific needs and abilities. In exchange for performing hard physical labor and sometimes unpleasant tasks, animal caretakers gain insight into the unique behavior of animals. They need to be patient and kind, yet firm, in their treatment of animals. Prospective animal caretakers should be good at following schedules and directions, reading animal behavior, solving problems, and communicating with people—especially children when in an educational setting.

Duties and Responsibilities

- Giving food and water to animals
- Cleaning equipment and the living spaces of animals
- Monitoring animals and recording details of their diet, physical condition, and behavior
- Examining animals for signs of illness or injury
- Exercising animals
- Bathing animals, trimming nails, clipping hair, and attending to other grooming needs
- Training animals to obey or to behave in a specific manner

Profile

Interests: Animals, People, Things

Working Conditions: Both Inside and Outside

Physical Strength: Medium Work, Heavy Work

Education Needs: On-the-Job Training, High School Diploma with G.E.D., High School Diploma with Technical Education, Apprenticeship

Licensure/Certification: Usually Not Required

Opportunities for Experience: Apprenticeship, Volunteer Work, Part-Time Work

Interest Score: RC

A Day in the Life—Duties and Responsibilities

The two most common responsibilities of animal caregivers are feeding animals and cleaning their living environments. They feed animals according to guidelines set by veterinarians or other professionals, or the animals' owners. Most animals are given prepackaged, formulated food, although some may be fed live prey such as rodents, insects, or other small animals. Some baby mammals must be fed by a

bottle or dropper. Before cleaning a cage, stall, aquarium, or other enclosure, the animal caretaker typically removes the animal and places it in another safe location. The habitat is then emptied of debris and sprayed, wiped, mopped, or scrubbed with a strong disinfectant and/or detergent. After rinsing and drying, the caretaker applies a fresh layer of bedding and/or replaces heat lamps, lights, toys, water bottles, and other equipment. In addition to cages, animal caretakers must clean carriers, dog runs, quarantine areas, medical treatment areas, and other supplies and rooms that may become contaminated.

Bathing, grooming, exercising, and socializing are also typical components of animal care. Caretakers may walk dogs, ride horses, or observe mice scurrying through special mazes, which are often among the greatest rewards of the work.

Some animal caretakers assist professional trainers or train animals themselves for educational, entertainment, security, and medical purposes. They also transport animals to shows, animal hospitals, and other locations. Depending on training and work setting, animal caretakers may perform healthcare tasks, such as dressing wounds and administering medications. They are also sometimes involved with the death of animals or assist with euthanasia.

When not working directly with animals, animal caretakers often keep records, maintain inventories of food and supplies, and greet customers or give educational presentations.

OCCUPATION SPECIALTIES

Animal Shelter Attendant

Animal shelter attendants typically work with cats and dogs in animal shelters or rescue leagues. These attendants take care of the animals' basic needs and may have administrative duties, such as keeping records, answering questions from the public, educating visitors about pet health, and screening people who want to adopt an animal. Experienced attendants may have more responsibilities, such as helping to vaccinate or euthanize animals alongside a veterinarian.

Animal Trainer

Animal trainers teach animals a variety of skills, such as obedience, performance, riding, security, and assisting people with disabilities. They familiarize animals with human voices and contact, and they teach animals to respond to commands. Most animal trainers work with dogs and horses, but some work with marine mammals, such as dolphins. Trainers teach a variety of skills. For example, some train dogs to guide people with disabilities, or they may train animals for a competition.

Fast Fact

Not only do 55 percent of startups begin at home, they stay there. Fifty-nine percent of established small businesses operate from their owners' homes.

Source: fortunly.com.



Many established small businesses operate out of their owner's homes. Photo via iStock.com/jjeab. [Used under license.]

Groom

Grooms work at stables, caring for horses and maintaining equipment. Responsibilities include feeding, grooming, and exercising horses; cleaning stalls; polishing saddles; and organizing the tack room, which stores harnesses, saddles, and bridles. Experienced grooms sometimes help train horses.

Groomer

Groomers specialize in maintaining a pet's appearance. They typically groom dogs and cats, which may include cutting, trimming, shampooing, and styling fur; clipping nails; and cleaning ears. Groomers also schedule appointments, sell products to pet owners, and identify problems that may require veterinary attention. Groomers may work in or operate a grooming salon, kennel, veterinary clinic, pet supply store, or mobile grooming service, a self-contained business that travels to clients' homes.

Kennel Attendant

Kennel attendants care for pets, often overnight, in place of owners. They clean cages and dog runs and feed, exercise, and play with animals. Experienced attendants also may provide basic healthcare, bathe animals, and attend to other basic grooming needs.

Pet Sitter

Pet sitters look after animals while the pet owner is away. Most pet sitters feed, walk, and play with pets daily. They go to the pet owner's home, allowing the pet to stay in its familiar surroundings and follow its routine. Experienced pet sitters also may bathe, groom, or train pets. Pet sitters typically watch over dogs, but some also take care of cats and other pets.

Zookeeper

Zookeepers care for animals in zoos. They plan diets, feed animals, and monitor the animals' eating patterns. They also clean the animals' enclosures and monitor behavior for signs of illness or injury. Depending on the size of the zoo, they may

work with one species or multiple species of animals. Zookeepers may help raise young animals, and they often spend time answering questions from the public.

WORK ENVIRONMENT

Immediate Physical Environment

Animals and their environments often come with strong odors or noises. Animal caretakers are at some risk for diseases, bites, scratches, or kicks from animals, and they can be exposed to harsh cleaning chemicals, germicides, and insecticides. The work may be physically demanding, requiring heavy lifting, standing for long periods, and regular bending and kneeling. Some caretakers might also find the work emotionally difficult at times.

Human Environment

Many animal caretakers spend as much time working with humans as they do animals. Most report to a supervisor, director, or manager, and interact with volunteers and various staff members, such as veterinarians, research scientists, and professional groomers or trainers. Self-employed pet sitters interact with their clients and household staff. Caretakers who work in animal shelters and commercial settings also interact with the public. Humane educators must coordinate with schools and learning centers and spend the bulk of their time preparing for and delivering presentations to children of varying ages. They may also host children at a facility such as a shelter.

Technological Environment

The level of technological sophistication varies with the type of facility. Some caretakers work in fully equipped offices with computerized feeding schedules and high-tech security systems. Many caretakers also use hand and power tools to maintain cages or other animal environments. Some animal caretakers drive wagons, trucks, vans, or cars to transport animals. Humane educators may use distance-learning tools such as video-conferencing apps to engage with children, although in-person lessons are still preferred where possible. Caretakers who are self-employed or run a business with staff must be familiar with standard business software programs such as accounting and payroll.

EDUCATION, TRAINING, AND ADVANCEMENT

High School/Secondary

A high school diploma or its equivalent is required for most jobs. A vocational course in animal science, usually offered through agricultural education programs, will provide a suitable foundation for some animal caretaker jobs; however, students interested in becoming a zookeeper, aquarist, or veterinary technician must follow a college-preparatory program. Important courses include biology, health, math, English, and speech communication. Volunteer or part-time work in an animal shelter, veterinary office, pet store, kennel, or farm, or pet sitting for friends and neighbors will provide the experience desired by many employers. Students should also consider 4-H and similar extracurricular opportunities that build familiarity with animals and their care.

Suggested High School Subjects

- Algebra
- Biology
- Chemistry
- Civics
- Earth or Environmental Science
- English
- Geography
- Geometry
- History
- Physics
- Psychology
- Trigonometry

Related Career Pathways/Majors

*Agriculture, Food & Natural Resources
Career Cluster*

- Animal Systems Pathway

Hospitality & Tourism Career Cluster

- Recreation, Amusements &
Attractions Pathway

Transferable Skills and Abilities

Compassion

- Showing compassion when dealing with animals and their owners
- Showing kindness to animals

Customer-service Skills

- Understanding pet owners' needs

Detail-oriented

- Maintaining records and monitoring changes in animals' behavior

Patience

- Maintaining patience when working with animals

Physical Stamina

- Kneeling, crawling, and lifting heavy supplies, such as bags of food

Problem-solving Skills

- Assessing whether animals are responding to teaching methods and identifying which methods are successful

Reliability

- Caring for animals on schedule and in a timely manner

Postsecondary

Although pet groomers typically learn by working under the guidance of an experienced groomer, they can also attend grooming schools. Animal trainers usu-

ally need a high school diploma or equivalent, although some positions may require a bachelor's degree. For example, marine mammal trainers usually need a bachelor's degree in marine biology, animal science, biology, or a related field. Dog trainers and horse trainers may take courses at community colleges or vocational and private training schools. Most zoos require zookeepers to have a bachelor's degree in biology, animal science, or a related field.

Related College Majors

- Animal Behavior
- Animal Science
- Environmental Science
- Equine Studies
- Marine Biology
- Pre-Veterinary Studies
- Veterinary Nursing
- Veterinary Technology
- Zoology

Adult Job Seekers

Adults with the appropriate educational background and firsthand experience as pet owners, animal foster caretakers, or volunteers in pet shelters or rehabilitation centers may be qualified for many animal caretaker jobs. Pet sitting and grooming may offer the most flexible schedules. Interested landowners might be in a good position to establish a kennel or boarding stables as an entrepreneurial opportunity. The necessary skills and knowledge for animal care can be learned from online courses, as well as evening or weekend continuing education courses. Qualified animal caretakers should apply directly to companies and organizations that have posted open positions.

New animal caretakers are often limited to cleaning cages and feeding animals but are given additional responsibilities after gaining experience. Animal caretakers can move into supervisory or management positions with additional experience or education.

Professional Certification and Licensure

There are no licenses required for animal caretakers, although the owners of kennels, laboratories, and rescue shelters are regulated. Professional certification is available from the National Association of Professional Pet Sitters (NAPPS), American Association for Laboratory Animal Science (AALAS), and other pro-

essional associations. Most certifications require completion of an exam, which in some cases includes a practical section.

Additional Requirements

A driver's license is required for many jobs. Animal caretakers also need to be in good health, with good eyesight and hearing. Familiarity with the Animal Welfare Act (AWA) is also beneficial.

EARNINGS AND ADVANCEMENT

Earnings depend on the employer, size and geographic location of the facility, and the individual's education and experience. Earnings are also dependent on whether the caretaker is self-employed.

Animal caretakers earned a median annual salary of \$24,780 in 2019. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$18,630, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$38,630.

Animal trainers earned a median annual salary of \$30,430 in 2019. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$20,810, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$59,110.

Animal care and service workers may receive paid vacations, holidays, and sick days; life and health insurance; and retirement benefits. These are usually paid by an employer.

EMPLOYMENT AND OUTLOOK

There were approximately 300,700 animal caretakers employed nationally in 2019. Most were employed by boarding kennels, animal shelters, stables, grooming shops, animal hospitals, and veterinary offices. Twenty-six percent of animal caretakers in 2019 were self-employed.

There were approximately 50,200 animal trainers employed nationally in 2019. Thirty-five percent were self-employed, and the rest were employed in agriculture and forestry, animal production and aquaculture, arts and entertainment, and retail trade.

Employment of animal care and service workers is expected to grow much faster than the average for all occupations through the year 2029, with employment projected to increase 22 percent. This is due to the continual growth of the pet population. Many people consider their pets to be a part of their family and are willing to pay more for pet care than pet owners have in the past. As more households include companion pets, employment of animal care and service workers in the pet services industry will continue to grow. Employment of animal care and service workers in kennels, grooming shops, and pet stores is projected to increase to keep up with the growing demand for animal care.

Many of those openings are expected to result from the need to replace workers who transfer to different occupations or exit the labor force, such as to retire.

Related Occupations

- Agricultural Worker
- Farmer/Rancher/Other Agricultural Manager
- Veterinarian
- Veterinary Assistant/Laboratory Animal Caretaker
- Veterinary Technologist/Technician
- Zoologist/Wildlife Biologist

MORE INFORMATION

Academy of Prosocial Learning (APL)

860.262.1807

info@prosocialacademy.org

www.prosocialacademy.org

American Association for Laboratory Animal Science (AALAS)

9190 Crestwyn Hills Drive

Memphis, TN 38125

901.754.8620

info@aalas.org

www.aalas.org

Offers testing and certification for animal technicians

www.aalas.org/certification/technician-certification

American Humane Association

1400 16th Street NW, Suite 360
Washington, DC 20036
800.227.4645
info@americanhumane.org
www.americanhumane.org

American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA)

424 East 92nd Street
New York, NY 10128-6804
212.876.7700
outreach@aspca.org
www.aspca.org

Association of Zoos and Aquariums

8403 Colesville Road, Suite 710
Silver Spring, MD 20910-3314
301.562.0777
generalinquiry@aza.org
www.aza.org
Sponsors professional development training and scholarships to attend training
www.aza.org/scholarships

Humane Education Advocates Reaching Teachers (HEART)

P.O. Box 738
Mamaroneck, NY 10543
347.766.7650
email@teachheart.org
teachheart.org

Humane Education Coalition

432 S. Juliana Street
Bedford, PA 15522
info@hecoalition.org
www.hecoalition.org

Humane Education Network (HEN)

650.851.8735
hen@hennet.org
www.hennet.org

Humane Society of the United States

Companion Animals Division
1255 23rd Street NW, Suite 450
Washington, DC 20037
202.452.1100
www.humanesociety.org

Institute for Humane Education

P.O. Box 260
Surry, ME 04684
info@humaneeducation.org
humaneeducation.org

Latham Foundation for the Promotion of Humane Education

1320 Harbor Bay Parkway, Suite 200
Alameda, CA 94502
510.521.0920
www.latham.org

National Association of Animal Breeders (NAAB)

8413 Excelsior Drive, Suite 140
Madison, WI 53717
608.827.0277
naab-css@naab-css.org
www.naab-css.org

National Association of Professional Pet Sitters (NAPPS)

P.O. Box 362
Huron, OH 44839
856.439.0324
NAPPS@petsitters.org
www.petsitters.org
Offers online course that leads to certification:
petsitters.org/page/NAPPSCertificationCourse

Maddie's Fund

6150 Stoneridge Mall Road, Suite 125
Pleasanton, CA 94588
925.310.5450
info@maddiesfund.org
www.maddiesfund.org

Maddie's Tail Wag activities for children:
www.maddiesfund.org/maddies-tail-wag.htm

RedRover

P.O. Box 188890
Sacramento, CA 95818
916.429.2457
info@redrover.org
redrover.org
Readers program:
redrover.org/readers

Sally Driscoll; updated by Stuart Paterson



Conversation With...

AUDREY REICHARDT

Co-owner, Dogwood Acres Pet Resort
Davidsonville, MD, 23 years

What was your individual career path in terms of education/training, entry-level job, or other significant opportunity?

My husband Kurt and I do this together, and we're a really good team. He has a background in architecture. So much of what we do involves the design of buildings and facilities, and he has a really good understanding of how buildings are made and how they work. My background is human resources and organizational development.

Kurt got his architecture degree from Clemson University and after one year, he realized an office career was not for him. I graduated from Davidson College with a degree in industrial organizational psychology and went on to get a Master's in human resources and organizational development from Johns Hopkins University, which is just incredibly useful.

We both love animals. We found this property, which is in an affluent, semi-agricultural area near Washington, DC. It was just dumb luck there was a kennel here, and Kurt started boarding animals as a side business.

We sold everything and moved onto the property, into an existing apartment. My husband's father is a retired veterinarian in the area, and Kurt had a lot of exposure to small business and caring for animals. My parents were looking for an investment and invested in this property. We turned a profit very quickly, and it became clear the business would grow. So, I quit my job as a national recruiter for a big international company called Goldwell Cosmetics and came to work for us and applied all my skills. My job is hiring, performing assessments, marketing, strategic planning, and business development.

Zoning, however, was impossible. It took five years for us to make improvements and expand. At that time, the pet industry had not yet exploded. The banks weren't sure they wanted to invest in two young people. But we knew the demand. Business was begging by the time we opened the doors on our expansion, and we went from 30 to 50 pets overnight and 30 in daycare to tripling that.

Unfortunately, due to zoning, many pet hotels are in industrial areas and have to be indoors. We were able to create huge playgrounds here. We created outdoor space for dogs, who are all about interaction and energy. We built separate, unique cat rooms and suites with individu-

ally ventilated cat condos because cats get respiratory diseases. It's quiet. We have activities that suit whatever the pet needs or the owners want. We have a lot of flexibility. The only thing we can't accommodate is putting a cat and dog together unless it's a small dog. This year, after a long property search, we opened a similar, second pet resort across the Chesapeake Bay Bridge from Annapolis in a well-traveled location.

Day care is the bread and butter of our business; it's most profitable and most resistant to recession and change. People who bring their dogs rely on it, especially if they have an energetic or destructive dog. Our staffing rule of thumb is one caretaker for every 15 dogs. We take care of an animal, but we also are taking care of an entire family.

We benefit from being close to Washington, DC, which is relatively recession-proof. We generate business through word of mouth, of course, but also through veterinarians, pet retail, hotels, and realtors who refer people who are moving or have to show their house.

What are the most important skills and/or qualities for someone in your profession?

When you're dealing with pet care, patience is extremely important. It's a very physically demanding job, and you do a lot of cleaning. On a very hot day or very cold day, you're out there with the dogs. I also look for people with high integrity.

What do you wish you had known going into this profession?

If you want your business to be successful, you don't really do what you went into the business to do, which is to care for the animals. You need basic business and finance skills, and there's no avoiding it.

Are there many jobs opportunities in your profession? In what specific areas?

No. The most traditional path in pet care is to become a veterinarian, but those are medical jobs. People might decide to be a vet tech, then decide, "I don't want to do euthanasia or see blood. I want to play with animals." I think entering this industry is easy but getting an actual opportunity is difficult. Very few places make enough money to hire a lot of staff.

How do you see your profession changing in the next five years, how will technology shift, and what skills will be required?

As with everything else, technology constantly impacts our business. We're eventually expecting simple things like using technology to catalog when a dog goes in and out of a room. A lot of the time and effort that goes into managing that process won't be needed in the future. However, you can't do this work without humans because you need someone who is paying attention to what's going on, whether you're dealing with a problem or supervising play.

What do you enjoy most about your job? What do you enjoy least about your job?

As a business owner, I most enjoy developing talent. I'm also lucky to be in such a joyous field and to be around the animals. I least enjoy the disciplinary side of dealing with employees. And on the pet care side, unfortunately sad things do happen. A pet may get injured or pass away, such as a dog who died of congestive heart failure without any forewarning. We've had injuries that were our fault and that, technically, were not. These kinds of things will happen, and you have to be prepared. On the other hand, we have saved dogs' lives due to issues the owners had overlooked and that's really satisfying.

Can you suggest a valuable “try this” for students considering a career in your profession?

Volunteer at a shelter. People may love animals but it's very different when you are taking care of someone else's animal—an animal you don't know. In a shelter, there is barking, a dog will jump on you, an animal will be terrified and bite you. You will not like every dog, and every dog will not like you. These are not your pets at home who are not under stress. Also, it's a physical job. You clean up a lot.