

Animal Caretaker

Snapshot

Career Cluster: Animal Science; Environment & Conservation; Hospitality & Tourism

Interests: Animals and Animal Maintenance and Training

Earnings (Yearly Average): \$22,510

Employment & Outlook: Faster Than Average Growth Expected

OVERVIEW

Sphere of Work

Animal caretakers tend to the needs of mammals, birds, fish, amphibians, and reptiles for various nonprofit organizations, research facilities, and private businesses, as well as for 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.



Work Environment

Animal caretakers work in zoos, kennels, pet stores, shelters, animal hospitals, wildlife 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.

Profile

Working Conditions: Work both Indoors and Outdoors

Physical Strength: Medium to Heavy Work

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

Licensure/Certification: Usually Not Required

Physical Abilities Not Required: N/A

Opportunities For Experience: Apprenticeship, Volunteer Work, Part Time Work

Holland Interest Score*: RCS

* See Appendix A

Occupation Interest

Animal caretaker positions attract people who respect animals and understand their particular 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.

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 pre-packaged, 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 health-care 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.

Duties and Responsibilities

- **Watering and feeding animals**
- **Washing and grooming animals**
- **Leading animals between living areas and other locations**
- **Exercising animals**
- **Administering prescribed medications/vitamins**
- **Assisting in the transport of animals**
- **Maintaining cleanliness of animal living spaces**

OCCUPATION SPECIALTIES

Animal Keepers

Animal Keepers feed, water, and clean the quarters of the birds and animals in zoos, circuses, and menageries. They prepare the food to be given to the animals and add vitamins and medication to the food.

Animal Trainers

Animal Trainers train animals for riding, security, performance, obedience, or assisting people with disabilities. They familiarize animals with human voices and contact, and they teach animals to respond to commands.

Animal-Nursery Workers

Animal-Nursery Workers care for newborn and young animals in a zoo nursery and exhibit area. They prepare the liquid formula and other foods for the animals and standard diets for mothers and newborns according to the requirements of the species.

Kennel Attendants

Kennel Attendants maintain dog kennels and assist trainers in teaching dogs to be obedient, guide the blind, hunt, track, or work as police dogs.

Pet Shop Attendants

Pet Shop Attendants show pets to customers, order and sell supplies, and keep sales records.

Pet Sitters

Pet Sitters work with clients' pets in their homes, feeding, walking, and otherwise tending to them as requested by the client.

Stable Attendants

Stable Attendants exercise animals regularly, polish saddles and bridles, and assist with horseshoeing. They may also harness, saddle, and unsaddle horses as well as rub them down after exercise periods.

Aquarists

Aquarists attend fish and other aquatic life in aquarium exhibits. They also take water samples for laboratory analysis and maintain records of numbers and kinds of fish.

WORK ENVIRONMENT

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.

Relevant Skills and Abilities

Interpersonal/Social Skills

- Being able to work independently
- Communicating with others

Organization & Management Skills

- Being reliable
- Following instructions
- Performing routine work

Work Environment Skills

- Working with animals

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. Animal trainers and attendants in zoos, public aquariums, and marine parks may stage live demonstrations for audiences.

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.

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, 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

- Agricultural Education
- Biology
- English

Famous First

The first animal humane society in the United States was the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), founded in New York City in 1866. Its founder, Henry Bergh, had been a member of a U.S. diplomatic mission in St. Petersburg, Russia, where he witnessed carriage drivers beating their horses. Upon his return to America he organized the ASPCA, patterned after the Royal SPCA in London.



College/Postsecondary

Most animal caretakers are trained on the job. Continuing education courses in animal care, offered through community colleges, vocational schools, and various animal and veterinary organizations, provide additional skills and knowledge and might be necessary to attain certification for more advanced positions. Business courses will help those who intend to open a kennel or operate a professional pet-sitting business. A bachelor's degree in zoology or biology is usually the minimum requirement for professional zookeepers and public aquarium specialists, while an associate's degree is sometimes the minimum requirement for animal laboratory caretakers and veterinary technicians.

Related College Majors

- Agricultural Production & Management
- Animal Science
- Biology
- Environmental Science
- Fisheries Sciences & Management
- 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. 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 professional 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.

Fun Fact

Veterinary technicians have a higher-than-average rate of injury on the job, and it's not hard to imagine why. Sick or injured animals can get a bit snippy during treatment, most often when being held, restrained, or cleaned. Vet techs are trained to identify aggressive behavior, which can help prevent injury.

Source: veterinary-technician-colleges.com and they cite bureau of labor statistics.

EARNINGS AND ADVANCEMENT

Earnings depend on the employer, size and geographic location of the facility, and the individual's education and experience. Animal caretakers earned a mean annual salary of \$22,510 in 2013. The lowest ten percent earned less than \$16,580, and the highest ten percent earned more than \$32,660.

Animal caretakers may receive paid vacations, holidays, and sick days; life and health insurance; and retirement benefits. These are usually paid by the employer.

Metropolitan Areas with the Highest Employment Level in This Occupation

Metropolitan area	Employment*	Employment per thousand jobs	Hourly mean wage
Chicago-Joliet-Naperville, IL	5,390	1.46	\$11.05
Los Angeles-Long Beach-Glendale, CA	3,930	0.99	\$11.72
Dallas-Plano-Irving, TX	3,400	1.58	\$10.15
Washington-Arlington-Alexandria, DC-VA-MD-WV	3,350	1.42	\$11.65
Houston-Sugar Land-Baytown, TX	3,040	1.10	\$9.84
Nassau-Suffolk, NY	2,920	2.36	\$11.60
Atlanta-Sandy Springs-Marietta, GA	2,910	1.26	\$10.15
New York-White Plains-Wayne, NY-NJ	2,820	0.54	\$12.52
Phoenix-Mesa-Glendale, AZ	2,590	1.45	\$10.83
St. Louis, MO-IL	2,150	1.67	\$10.36

* Does not include self-employed.

EMPLOYMENT AND OUTLOOK

There were approximately 150,000 animal caretakers employed nationally in 2013. Most animal caretakers were employed by boarding kennels, animal shelters, stables, grooming shops, animal hospitals and veterinary offices.

Employment of animal caretakers is expected to grow faster than the average for all occupations through the year 2022, which means employment is projected to increase about 15 percent. This is owing to the continual growth of the pet population, as more people take on pets.

Employment Trend, Projected 2012–22

Nonfarm animal caretakers: 15%

Animal trainers: 15%

Animal care and service workers: 15%

Total, all occupations: 11%

Note: "All Occupations" includes all occupations in the U.S. Economy. Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Employment Projections Program.

Related Occupations

- Farmer/Farm Manager
- Marine Biologist
- Wildlife Biologist

Conversation With . . .

LEXA ELWELL

Veterinary Assistant, 8 years
Tidewater Veterinary Hospital
Charlotte Hall, MD

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

I didn't go to college but had jobs like waiting tables or being a receptionist. I stumbled across my vet hospital's ad eight years ago. I wasn't looking for a job in the animal field but I love dogs and cats and am the type who always wants to be around animals. Like everyone, I wanted to be a veterinarian when I was little. But I didn't have an interest in doing more school; I'm more of a hands-on person. I think this is what I'm meant to do in life. I wake up every day wondering what's going to happen. A veterinary assistant is someone who did not go to school to get a degree in the veterinary field and has to work under a doctor.

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

I work for six doctors and that gets demanding. You need to think fast, remember routine things, be organized, and be ready for what the day brings. We often have to work fast, especially in a crisis. Say a dog is not breathing. There's no time to prepare. You have to be on top of things.

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

Since I'm not a licensed or certified veterinary technician, I have to do things like injections under the supervision of a doctor. Still, I wish I could do mathematics off the top of my head to figure out injection doses and those types of needs like the veterinarians can do.

4. Are there many job opportunities in your profession? In what specific areas?

It's hard for me to say, but from what I've seen people seem to stay in their veterinary assistant jobs for awhile. It really does take a special kind of person; you don't get paid a lot and you need to have a heart for the animals. If you have a love of animals, I would suggest checking with vet hospitals in your area to explore the possible opportunities.

5. How do you see your profession changing in the next five years, what role will technology play in those changes, and what skills will be required?

There might be some new machines for diagnostic testing and they are always coming up with new ways to handle patient records. But this is a job where human care for the animals is not going to be replaced.

6. What do you like most about your job? What do you like least about your job?

Part of the job is that every day is different, and I like the adrenaline rush of an emergency. For example, we recently did a C-section for a dog, which is a pretty quick thing because you don't want the mom under anesthesia very long. The doctor does the surgery and usually a couple of us are assisting; the doctor hands each veterinary assistant a puppy and we get the placenta off, make sure it's breathing, and get the doctor involved if it's not. Another vet is around in case something additional needs to be done. We did one the other night. Unfortunately the dog had one puppy on its own that died but we ended up doing the C-section and she successfully birthed five more puppies.

My least favorite part of the job is when that dog, cat, or horse has been under our care for a long time — animals I have a relationship with — and we have to put them down. I also don't like being the person watching an animal as the owner drags his feet while the animal suffers, even though I know it's difficult to decide to let your animal go.

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

We have people come in and out of our clinic to shadow the doctors and staff. The biggest problem I notice they have — and not just the shadowers, but anyone new to the situation — is the first time they see an animal cut open. That's the test. If you can handle it, this job might be for you.

SELECTED SCHOOLS

Many agricultural, technical, and community colleges offer programs in animal science. Interested students are advised to consult with their school guidance counselor or to research area postsecondary schools and training programs. For those interested in pursuing a bachelor's degree, refer to the list of schools in the "Wildlife Biologist" chapter in the present volume.

MORE INFORMATION

**American Association for
Laboratory Animal Science
(AALAS)**

9190 Crestwyn Hills Drive
Memphis, TN 38125
901.754.8620
www.aalas.org

American Humane Association

63 Inverness Drive East
Englewood, CO 80112
800.227.4645
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
www.aspca.org

**Association of Zoos and
Aquariums**

8403 Colesville Road, Suite 710
Silver Spring, MD 20910-3314
301.562.0777
www.aza.org

**Humane Society of the United
States**

Companion Animals Division
2100 L Street, NW
Washington, DC 20037
202.452.1100
www.hsus.org

**International Marine Animal
Trainer's Association**

1200 S. Lake Shore Drive
Chicago, IL 60605
312-692-3193
www.imata.org

**National Association of
Professional Pet Sitters (NAPPS)**

15000 Commerce Parkway
Suite C
Mount Laurel, NJ 08054
856.439.0324
www.petsitters.org