

Catherine Salmon

The 28-year-old is Animal Manager at Battersea Park Children's Zoo. She has worked there since graduating from the University of Aberystwyth with a degree in Animal Sciences five years ago. She lives in Tooting with her husband, a corporate fundraiser for a children's charity, and her two kittens, Colo and Chippy.

When I get up I normally trip over the kittens, who have set up camp outside the bedroom door. We never had pets when I was growing up, but I have wanted to work with animals since childhood. When I got married my baby photos came out, and my Mum noticed that in most of them I'm with some sort of animal.

At around 6.45am I roll downstairs, grab some tea and cereal, then go straight to work. It's not a long journey but I wouldn't want to live any further away; I like to know I can get in quickly if necessary.

If all the keepers are early, we take the donkeys and ponies for a walk in the park, where we get some strange looks. Then we start cleaning. In this job, you have to be happy to work in the rain or scorching heat, and not mind getting dirty and smelly. If there are animals in the vet's unit, we treat them and clean them out.

I wanted to be a vet at one point, and ours lets me watch him work. He wants to hear what I have to say, especially as he hasn't dealt with some of the animals before, so he's learning too. Deciding to put an animal down is hard. Often you have to accept that it just isn't going to recover. When that happens, you can't help but take the feeling home with you.

The keepers come in for tea, toast and gossip before opening. This is our 'catch-up' time and we talk about the animals – who is ill, who has been moved.

At 10.55am, the otters start calling for their feed. I'm the Animal manager, but I sometimes think it's them managing me! When it's quiet we try to mix feeding times up, but they have very high-pitched voices that sound like screams, so it's a battle of wills as to how long you can bear it.

At 11.30am it's the primates' turn. They watch us come out and I'm sure they know the rotas - sometimes they seem to look at you and think, 'No, you're not feeding us today', so they don't bother giving you a shout. There's a monkey called Rocky who normally throws things at me, but if I have been away he does a happy little chirp and comes over to the bars so I can hold his hand. It's the only time he ever does it.

The kids are fascinated when they see us working. A lot of children never see animals in the city. The first question is 'How did you get in there?' and then the jokes start – 'Look at that funny monkey in the green jumper!' Hilarious.

We stop for lunch at 1pm. Some of the keepers are vegetarian, but I'm a true carnivore. I only eat organic meat, though - I need to know the animals have been raised and cared for well. Contrary to what people might think, you don't have to love animals to be a keeper; you have to respect them. They aren't your pets, they're your job.

In the afternoon there is more feeding and cleaning. We go through a checklist before leaving, otherwise one of us will get home and think 'Did someone lock the tortoise house?' and we'll all start phoning each other, panicking. I have come back in to work a few times because no one can remember if the main door is locked. When I get there, it always is.

We have never had a break-in, but someone leaned over the fence and took Caroline, a box tortoise, earlier this year. Whoever stole her probably didn't realise that she needed a tropical environment and specialist care; it isn't a breed you can just keep in the garden.

At the end of the day I go home and relax in front of the TV – I'm a *Friends* addict. I get in around 7pm, cook dinner and have a glass of wine. My job is knackered and I need a lot of sleep, so I go to bed around 9.30pm.

Before I go to sleep, I usually think about the zoo. If there is a problem with an animal, I think about what we are going to do. Even when it's hard, you have to be prepared to do what's best for the animals and for the species. This job needs someone with a much broader outlook than the average bunny-hugger.

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