



Cool at the Zoo

Zookeepers spend winter keeping critters warm, cozy

By BRAD DAVIS
Staff Reporter

While the doors to the Lincoln Folsom Children's Zoo are closed until the weather warms, some people may wonder what happens to the animals they usually see basking in the sun.

For the zookeepers, winter means anything but hibernation. It's a full-time job.

Randy Scheer, animal curator of the Folsom Zoo said that, depending on the animal, zoo workers use heaters, hot pads, and heat lamps to recreate the summer feel.

"The only challenging part is that you're out there all day in the cold trying to keep things warm."

At the Folsom Zoo when the October temperatures start to drop to 55 degrees during the night, zoo workers prepare for the winter season, which lasts until the zoo opens April 19.

Animals start coming in at night, and reptiles, small tropical birds, crocodiles and tortoises are transferred to their permanent winter quarters.

"Moving a crocodile is simple," he said. "You have three people. One lays a towel over its eyes, which makes the crocodile open its mouth, which then slowly shuts.

"Then, on the count of three, I get right over the mouth and grab the snout as another person grabs the tail. Another person takes duct tape and tapes its snout."

Other animals, which are easier to move, are given barns or boxes as shelters from the cold. They can come and go as they please, he said.

"People see flamingos out in the water and wonder how we can keep them there during the winter. It's because we supply food and keep the water warm for them."

Because the animals are living outside, their food requirements also change during the winter.

"Seals get a little more fish and birds get more protein and carbohydrates, which puts fat on them," Scheer said. "Humans are the same as other animals in that if you lived outside, you would burn a lot of fat to stay warm."

Scheer examines the food containers in the

mornings to make sure each animal is eating properly.

"I like to see a little bit of food left in the morning. When I walk out to the exhibit, and the bowl is licked clean, I don't know if other critters outdoors are eating their food for them," Scheer said.

Despite the unwanted rodents taking their share of the zoo animals' food, Scheer has never had a winter-related death in the eight years he has worked at the Lincoln zoo.

More risks are present for the zookeepers during the winter, as well.

"You actually have to work out there when it's 40 below, is the only bad thing about it," Scheer said. "You're all bundled up trying to fix things and carry food."

Jamie Wickham, a junior fisheries and wildlife major at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, has been a temporary zookeeper for the Lincoln zoo for the past two years. She said zookeepers had to be careful handling animals in the close proximity of their winter homes.

Although working in the cold all day can be taxing, the zookeepers also feel there are rewards involved to working with animals in the chilly months, Wickham said.

"I like to be able to learn about them and the type of care they need during the winter," she said. "It's a challenge, but it's fun."

Scheer said animals sometimes behave differently during the winter.

"Some love the snow. Camels love to roll around in it, otters and wallabies like it. It's fun to watch animals in that different environment," Scheer said.

Some of the general public has some misconceptions about what happens to the zoo creatures during the cold weather.

"People sometimes don't understand how we can keep camels, flamingos and kangaroos here during the winter — the types of animals people don't think can live in this environment," Scheer said. "We wouldn't keep them some place where they couldn't be."

"We love these things. We don't have any animals here that get cold."

Photos by Daniel Luedert

KALIF, a male Bactrian camel (above), is not yawning. He stretches his mouth wide because he is teething. Like all of Folsom's camels, Kalif spends the winter outside.

OBIL THE HARBOR seal (above right) splashes about the pool during feeding time. The seals are fed more in the winter to keep them warm and supply layers of fat.



CHILEAN FLAMINGOS (top) stand at the door of their barn. **ZOOKEEPER KIM AHRENS** (above) feeds Oblio, a harbor seal, as Pearl looks on.



A NORTH AMERICAN river otters strikes a pose in his cage. The otters' thick coats protect from Lincoln's cold in the winter.