



Working with animals

Sara Royster | April 2015

Imagine going to work each day and seeing something staring back at you—a lion, a horse, maybe even a cobra. If the thought of going toe-to-toe with one of these creatures excites you rather than scares you, then working with animals could be your ideal career.

Many occupations involve working with animals, from the cute and cuddly to the big and brawny. In a zoo or on a farm, animal work might sound like fun, and it can be. But it involves a great deal of effort, too. “Some people think we just spend all day playing with animals,” says zookeeper Melissa Knutson of the Hogle Zoo in Salt Lake City, Utah, “but it’s so much more than that. It’s a lot of work to take care of another living thing.”

This article looks at the difficult parts of working with animals, as well as the enjoyable aspects. The first section describes different occupations that involve work with animals. The second section summarizes the employment, wages, and outlook for these occupations. The third section examines the positives and negatives

of animal work. And the fourth section gives an overview on how to prepare for working with animals. Sources for more information are at the end of the article.

Occupations in animal work

An animal-focused occupation, such as veterinarian, is sometimes an early career aspiration of children. And some people never outgrow that desire to make caring for animals their life's work. Here are some of the many occupations that involve caring for, training, or assisting with animals.

Agricultural workers

These workers raise animals on farms, on ranches, and in other facilities for food production. [Animal breeders](#) select and breed animals that have certain desirable characteristics, such as sheep with better quality wool or chickens that lay more eggs.

[Farm and ranch animal farmworkers](#) feed and care for cows, chickens, and other animals that are raised for food production. Other tasks include maintaining health records and cleaning cages, barns, and other housing.

[Farmers, ranchers, and other agricultural managers](#) oversee facilities that raise animals for food production. They devise ways to keep animals healthy and improve the farm's output.

Animal care and service workers

[Animal care and service workers](#) provide care for animals in different settings. Nearly all of these workers deal directly with animals.

For example, groomers and kennel attendants feed, clean, and brush animals. Nonfarm animal caretakers and pet sitters monitor those under their charge; they may have administrative duties, too. Animal trainers teach animals to respond to commands or correct animals' undesirable behavior, such as barking or biting.

Animal control workers

[Animal control workers](#) investigate reports of animal mistreatment. They rescue animals that have been abused, abandoned, or lost. Animal control workers also help handle dangerous animals and monitor crime scenes in which animals have been involved.

Animal scientists

[Animal scientists](#) conduct research on domestic farm animals, such as cows or chickens, to develop more efficient ways of producing milk, wool, and other products. They advise farmers on proper animal housing and nutrition, how to control disease, and aspects of animal genetics, such as how to breed animals so that their offspring have no birth defects.



Veterinarians

[Veterinarians](#) care for the health of animals by diagnosing, treating, and researching medical conditions and diseases. They treat and dress animals' wounds, perform surgery, and test for and vaccinate against diseases.

Some veterinarians specialize in the treatment of certain animals; for example, equine veterinarians treat horses exclusively. Others, such as zoo veterinarians, treat animals by location.

Veterinary assistants and laboratory animal caretakers

These workers look after animals in veterinary clinics and laboratories. They clean cages, feed and bathe animals, and monitor and care for animals after surgery or other procedures.

[Veterinary assistants](#) also may provide support for veterinarians during examinations by holding an animal or helping with the collection of blood or urine samples. [Laboratory animal caretakers](#)

make sure that lab animals, such as mice, are treated humanely.

Veterinary technologists and technicians

[Veterinary technologists and technicians](#) work under the supervision of a veterinarian, performing tests and helping diagnose animals. Other tasks include recording animals' medical histories, administering anesthesia, and taking and developing x rays. These workers have jobs in clinics and animal hospitals and usually deal with small animals and pets.

Some veterinary technicians and technologists work on other projects, such as biomedical research, food safety, and disaster preparedness.

Zoologists and wildlife biologists

These workers conduct research on animal characteristics and habitats. The research may involve hands-on work, such as tagging animals for tracking, or working in a lab, such as developing computer models of population dynamics for a particular animal species. [Zoologists and wildlife biologists](#) also may monitor endangered species and help develop conservation plans.

Most zoologists and wildlife biologists work on teams that include scientists from other specialties—such as hydrologists or geologists—to collect, analyze, and interpret data.

Employment, wages, and outlook

Employment, wages, and job outlook vary for the occupations described in this article. (See table 1.)

Employment of animal workers is concentrated in industries such as healthcare, agriculture, and personal services. Median wages of animal workers in May 2014 ranged from \$20,340 for nonfarm animal care takers to \$87,590 for veterinarians, according to the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) (BLS). And BLS projects job growth in many of these occupations between 2012 and 2022.

Table 1. Wages, employment, projected job openings, and self-employment for occupations working with animals

Occupation	Median annual wage, May 2014	Employment, 2012	Job openings, projected 2012-22	Self-employment, 2012 (percent)
Animal breeders	\$40,000	1,300	400	77.3
Animal control workers	32,560	14,600	4,500	n/a
Animal scientists	61,110	2,700	1,200	11.0
Animal trainers	25,770	41,600	24,500	62.5
Farmers, ranchers, and other agricultural managers	68,050	930,600	150,200	73.1
Farmworkers, farm, ranch, and aquacultural animals	22,930	77,900	25,300	0.6
Nonfarm animal caretakers	20,340	190,600	52,100	16.6
Veterinarians	87,590	70,300	31,000	18.3
Veterinary assistants and laboratory animal caretakers	23,790	74,600	21,300	n/a
Veterinary technologists and technicians	31,070	84,800	33,400	0.1
Zoologists and wildlife biologists	58,270	20,100	6,700	1.3

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Employment Statistics survey (wages), Employment Projections program (employment, projected openings, self-employment).

Employment. The number of people employed is relatively small in many animal-related occupations. For example, according to BLS [Employment Projections](#) data, there were 70,300 veterinarians in the United States in 2012. The largest occupation related to animals was [farmers, ranchers, and other agricultural managers](#), with 930,600 employed. The smallest occupation was [animal breeders](#), with 1,300.

[Employment Projections](#) data show that self-employment is common in some occupations that involve working with animals. For example, [animal care and service workers](#) include trainers and groomers who own a business instead of working at a pet store or clinic. Occupations such as [animal trainers](#), [animal breeders](#), and [farmers](#),

[ranchers, and other agricultural managers](#) each had more than 60 percent of workers who were self-employed in 2012. Other occupations, such as those related to the care of animals' health, have fewer self-employed workers because of the need for medical facilities and equipment.

Wages. BLS [Occupational Employment Statistics](#) survey data, which exclude self-employed workers, show that median annual wages for many of the animal-related occupations are below the median annual wage for all occupations, which was \$35,540 in May 2014. The median is the point at which half of workers in an occupation earned more than that amount and half earned less.

However, wages varied by occupation and industry. For example, the median annual wage of \$87,590 for [veterinarians](#) was more than double that for all occupations, reflecting the higher level of skills and education required to work in this occupation. And [veterinary assistants](#), [veterinary technicians](#), and [veterinary technologists](#) working in research often earned more than those working in other industries. For example, the median annual wage for veterinary technologists and technicians working in research and development in the physical, engineering, and life sciences was \$38,240, compared with a median wage of \$30,670 for those working in veterinary services.

Outlook. Employment in more than half of the animal occupations studied is projected to have at least average growth over the 2012–22 decade, according to BLS. Projected growth varies by occupation.

For example, employment growth of [veterinary technologists and technicians](#) is projected to be much faster than average because of increasing demand for the general care these workers provide. In comparison, BLS projects [veterinarians](#) to have only average employment growth.

In addition, declines in employment are projected in agriculture-related occupations, such as animal breeders and farmers, ranchers, and other agricultural managers. Factors affecting employment in these occupations include the consolidation of livestock establishments and the increasing automation of farmwork.

Ups and downs

A love of animals and the chance to spend time around them draws many people to these careers. But before deciding to make animal care your life's work, remember that these jobs are no walk in the dog park; in fact, many of them are physically dangerous or emotionally demanding.



Positives

Interacting with animals is its own reward for many workers in these occupations. Zoo veterinarian Lauren Howard of Houston, Texas, says that the opportunity to have a positive impact on animals makes her job even more gratifying. “At the zoo, I’m involved in special research with endangered toads that has the chance to save an entire species from extinction,” she says.

For other workers, the reward is in successfully teaching something to either people or animals. Riding instructor Kelly Mahloch of Plymouth, Wisconsin, finds satisfaction in her clients’ achievements: “I really enjoy when students ‘get it’ after they’ve been struggling with a concept,” she says.

Training animals provides them with exercise and mental stimulation. But it also allows workers to give better help to the animals they care about, says Knutson: “At my zoo, we have an elderly meerkat with heart issues. We are training him to accept a stethoscope so we can monitor his heart without taking him to a hospital. This allows us to react more quickly if there’s a medical issue.”

And workers often find that improving animals’ lives improves their own lives, too. “It’s in our nature as humans that when we see an animal in need, we want to help it,” says animal control officer Robert Leinberger of Chesterfield, Virginia. “Being able to help is a huge emotional reward for me.”

Negatives

But dealing with animals, both wild and tame, can be unpredictable and, sometimes, dangerous. For example, Leinberger once had to deal with an escaped albino monocled cobra, one of the most venomous snakes in the world. And Knutson trains black-footed cats, which are highly aggressive.

In addition, animal work can be smelly and noisy—and many tasks are dirty and physically demanding, too. Workers must be prepared to handle the daily challenges. “I have an extra pair of pants in my car,” Knutson says, “because almost every day I am crawling around in the mud or dirt looking for an animal.”

Some tasks associated with animal jobs are more taxing emotionally than physically. For example, animals that are sick or severely hurt may need to be euthanized. “You may not be the person performing the euthanasia, but you will be around it,” says Leinberger. “Even though it is humane, because we are ending an animal’s suffering, it is still upsetting.” And some workers, such as ranchers and laboratory animal caretakers, raise animals for food or other products.

Other responsibilities vary by occupation. For example, animal control workers may be required to visit crime scenes or testify in court, both of which can be stressful activities. Administrative duties can lessen workers’ time with the animals. And all animals need care 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, so workers often have demanding schedules.

Preparing for work with animals

Whether you’re curious about cats or interested in iguanas, some skills and education can help you get started in an animal career. Other preparation may be helpful, too, depending on which occupation you enter. Hands-on experience is also valuable, and you might find opportunities in your own community.

Skills. Communication skills are essential when working with animals. “Animals can’t speak for themselves, so we speak for them,” says animal trainer Katenna Jones of Providence, Rhode Island. And Howard says that workers need to use their understanding of animal behavior in communicating with owners or other workers: “You need to be observant and listen for what isn’t being said.”

And for the many self-employed in these occupations, business savvy is a must: it’s important to know how to promote your business, attract new customers, and manage money. Postsecondary courses and online resources are available on a wide range of topics. “They can teach you everything from how to set prices to making your own website and marketing,” says Jones.

Education. Most occupations that involve working with animals have no postsecondary education requirements. (See table 2.) However, employers may prefer to hire workers who have at least a high school diploma.

Table 2. Education, on-the-job training, and experience typically required for occupations working with animals

Occupation	Education	On-the-job training	Experience
Animal breeders	High school diploma or equivalent	Short-term ¹	Less than 5 years
Animal control workers	High school diploma or equivalent	Moderate-term ²	None
Animal scientists	Doctoral or professional degree	None ³	None

See footnotes at end of table.

Table 2. Education, on-the-job training, and experience typically required for occupations working with animals

Occupation	Education	On-the-job training	Experience
Animal trainers	High school diploma or equivalent	Moderate-term ²	None
Farmers, ranchers, and other agricultural managers	High school diploma or equivalent	None ³	5 years or more
Farmworkers, farm, ranch, and aquacultural animals	Less than high school diploma	Short-term ¹	None
Nonfarm animal caretakers	Less than high school diploma	Short-term ¹	None
Veterinarians	Doctoral or professional degree	None ³	None
Veterinary assistants and laboratory animal caretakers	High school diploma or equivalent	Short-term ¹	None
Veterinary technologists and technicians	Associate's degree	None ³	None
Zoologists and wildlife biologists	Bachelor's degree	None ³	None

¹ The skills needed for a worker to attain competency in an occupation can be acquired during 1 month or less of on-the-job experience and informal training. ² More than 1 month and up to 12 months of combined on-the-job experience and informal training is needed for workers to develop the skills needed to attain competency. ³ There is no additional occupation-specific training or preparation typically required to attain competency in the occupation. Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Employment Projections program.

Among occupations that do have education requirements beyond high school, levels vary. For example, [veterinary technicians](#) typically need a 2-year associate’s degree, and technologists usually must have a 4-year bachelor’s degree; both may need to be licensed in their state by passing an exam. [Veterinarians](#) must have a degree in veterinary medicine and a state license to practice.

Even in occupations that don’t usually require formal education, some workers pursue postsecondary study in specific subject areas. For example, [animal trainers](#) may take a course related to animal behavior. Other popular courses include animal science and animal management, especially for prospective workers at zoos or similarly large facilities. And some [farmers](#) earn a bachelor’s degree in business administration or a similar subject, because the management of farms has become complex.

Other preparation. Education alone may not fully prepare you for work with animals. Other requirements vary by occupation—and, often, by setting. For example, says Howard, zoo work involves caring for a greater variety of animal species than does clinic or hospital work. “At zoos, we care for everything, from lionfish to lions,” she says. “I have to know how to take blood from all different kinds of fish, birds, mammals, and reptiles.”

Certification is available for some animal occupations—including [veterinary assistants](#), riding instructors, pet sitters, and [animal trainers](#)—although it might not be required for employment. However, clients and employers may prefer to hire certified workers. For Mahloch, for example, becoming a certified riding instructor was a business decision designed to attract clients. “It was the best investment I ever made,” she says. Certification usually requires passing a written exam and demonstrating competency in important skills.

Workers in many of these occupations receive on-the-job training to help them avoid injury, a risk that increases for those dealing with sick or abused animals that react poorly to humans. Called protective contact training, this kind of training teaches workers how to handle animals properly and treat injuries if they occur. Workers who interact with exceptionally large animals, such as elephants, or exceptionally dangerous animals, such as tigers, have additional training. For example, Howard is specially licensed to administer powerful narcotics to zoo animals.

Being in good physical condition can be important for some jobs. “I have to carry around 50-pound bales of food,” Knutson says, “so I need to be fit.”

Experience. Workers in animal-related occupations agree that hands-on experience is good training for this kind of career.

“Volunteer at a clinic or shelter,” says Jones, “because you will come into contact with lots of different kinds of animals.” Mahloch agrees, noting that employers may look favorably on candidates who have an idea of what they’re getting into: “Experience with animals makes you a much better gamble for hiring.”

Many animal shelters and zoos offer volunteers the opportunity to understand how much work is involved: cleaning cages, exercising animals, and preparing food, among other tasks. And workers in full-time, paid positions often started as volunteers. “It’s kind of like a working interview,” says Knutson of volunteer efforts, “because it gives us a chance to see if they fit in with our staff and gives them a chance to try out the work.”

Leinberger, for one, says that hands-on experience gave him an advantage on the job. “Having worked in a vet’s office made me a better animal control officer,” he says. “On day one, I already knew how to put on a muzzle, how to properly pick up a cat by the scruff of its neck, and how to deal with animals in distress.”

Job shadowing experienced workers is also a good way to see what working with animals is really like. For example, prospective workers can ride along with an animal control officer, like Leinberger, for a day. Shadowing opportunities with workers in other occupations, such as animal trainers and animal care and service workers, may be available from local professional associations that support those occupations.

Jones suggests shadowing several people before choosing to model yourself after one whose work you admire. For example, shadowing other riding instructors helped Mahloch find teaching techniques she liked and didn’t like. “Working with many different people will help you learn different ways of doing things,” she says. “Find someone who does what you want to do the way you want to do it, and learn from that person.”



Sources for more information

Learn more about the occupations in this article and hundreds of other career options in the [Occupational Outlook Handbook](#) (OOH). The OOH describes what workers do, along with their working conditions, pay, education or training requirements, job outlook, and more.

Professional associations can provide information about education and careers in animal work. Your [local animal shelter](#), [4-H](#), or [FFA](#) chapter, or [wildlife center](#) can also be a good resource.

For information about animal training, visit the following organizations:

- [National Association of Dog Obedience Instructors](#)
- [International Marine Animal Trainers' Association](#)

For information about pet sitters, visit the [National Association of Professional Pet Sitters](#).

For information about keepers, visit the following associations:

- [Association of Zoos and Aquariums](#)
- [American Association of Zoo Keepers](#)

For information on careers in veterinary medicine, a list of U.S. schools and colleges of veterinary medicine, and information on accreditation policies, visit the [American Veterinary Medical Association](#).

For information on veterinary education, visit the [Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges](#).

For information on working as a zoo veterinarian, visit the [American Association of Zoo Veterinarians](#).

For information on becoming a veterinary technician or technologist, visit the [National Association of Veterinary Technicians in America](#).

For information on working as a zoo veterinary technician, visit the [Association of Zoo Veterinary Technicians](#).

For information about certification as a laboratory animal caretaker, visit the [American Association for Laboratory Animal Science](#).

For information about becoming a veterinary assistant, including career opportunities, visit the following organizations:

- [American Animal Hospital Association](#)
- [Society of Animal Welfare Administrators](#)
- [National Animal Care & Control Association](#)

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