

Animal Magic

It's the job of childhood dreams, but what's it really like to be a zookeeper? Hannah Bass spends a day finding out



Shovel at the ready, Hannah meets a rockhopper penguin (far left), and (l-r) prepares the zebra enclosure, feeds one of the curious coats and examines close-up the talented tongues of an anteater and a giraffe



that the 'midget buffalo' anoa are 'mad and playful' and 'like bashing things!' while pygmy hippos enjoy 'brushing teeth, leaf piles, logs in water and big palm leaves to wear as wigs' – and the baby hippo Thug 'likes to cross-dress!'

The kitchen shelves are also lined with huge jars of herbs – like an oversized spice rack – not for seasoning the animals' snacks but also for enrichment.

The pen is underwired to stop the meerkats invading Regent's Park

In the wild, detecting new scents in their environment is key to animal survival, so this is just another way of stimulating them. Apparently, lions adore catnip just as much as domestic cats, while tigers love rolling around in curry powder!

To my joy, another major source of stimulation comes in the form of play with the zookeepers. And the most playful of animals is the ring-tailed lemur. The lemur's Latin name is *nasua nasua*, which roughly translates as

kind of meals I'd previously associated with diet manuals by the likes of Gillian McKeith. I'm led underground, below the bearded pigs' enclosure, to prepare their lunch of chopped apples, carrots, oranges, potatoes, banana and beetroot. The walls of this subterranean animal kitchen are covered in blackboards detailing the precise ingredients for each animal's bucket of grub.

There's also an amusing blackboard entitled 'Animal Enrichment'. In the wild, most creatures' waking hours are spent hunting or foraging for food. If zookeepers simply deliver it in a trough, the animals will have nothing to do all day and boredom can lead to dire consequences – even self-harm, through pulling out their own fur or feathers. So the keepers must come up with entertaining ways of hiding and playing with the food. This is called 'enrichment', and the blackboard offers tried-and-tested ideas. It notes

wild, but imagine trying to eat soup with a snout. It gets messy!

It quickly becomes obvious that the job of zookeeper is not suitable for anyone who get the creeps from creepy-crawlies. After my fistful of worms, I'm presented with a wriggling sandwich bag of live locusts, crickets and mealworms, from which I scoop a handful to throw to the meerkats. The bugs run for their lives as the meerkats (smaller than I expected but just as cute and not, as a certain TV advert would suggest, with Russian accents or wearing dressing gowns) snuffle and scramble in the sand. Nathan explains that the pen is underwired to a depth of 3ft to stop an invasion of burrowing meerkats into surrounding Regent's Park.

Thankfully, bugs aren't everyone's bag – many of the larger mammals eat the



I scatter rough sand to help keep the zebras' hooves down – 'unlike a horse,' explains Nathan, 'you can't just pick up a hoof and stick a shoe on it' – after which comes a layer of sawdust.

After the zebras, it's the penguins, whose poo – as I discover while scrubbing at the rocks round their pool – is just like the pigeon variety you find on your car windscreen, although on a much larger scale. The penguins waddle around me as amiably as the film *Happy Feet* suggests, but Nathan warns me not to get my head too close to theirs because, like magpies, they're attracted to anything shiny – and that includes eyeballs.

When it's not poo I'm getting up close and personal with, it's tongues. I must

now be one of the few people in the world to be on intimate terms with the tongues of both a giraffe and an anteater. A giraffe's is muscular and rough like a cat's, though the little barbs are not used to break apart Whiskas and lazily self-groom, but to tear leaves, in this instance from the twigs in my hands.

An anteater's, on the other hand, is skinny and slithery as an eel – 60cm long and capable of extending up to 150 times a minute (that's more than twice a second). I take a handful of live worms and, mimicking the entrance to a termite mound, make a fist into which Benito the anteater's tongue darts like a whip. The sticky saliva that anteaters use to catch their prey leaves my palm feeling as though it's coated in wallpaper paste.

While I feed Benito, Nathan gives his foot-long snout a sponge bath. The anteaters' main diet in the zoo is a kind of termite soup. It's the only viable alternative to the 20,000 insects a night that an anteater would consume in the

If you're squeamish, then I suggest you stop reading now, because my day at London Zoo starts, as my mentor, keeper Nathan Coles, says, 'Doing what zookeepers do best – shovelling poo.'

Before any of the visitors have arrived, I'm in the zebra house sweeping up, scrubbing the floors and laying down fresh bedding.



Ring-tailed lemurs, the supermodels of the mammal world. Less keen on salad, though

London Zoo's Place In History

The world's oldest zoo, London Zoo can lay claim to a remarkable number of firsts.

- Opened by the London Zoological Society (of which Charles Darwin was a member) in 1828, London Zoo was the world's first scientific zoo – though it didn't actually open to the public until 1847.
- Royalty and the rich through history have always kept animal menageries, but the word 'zoo' was coined to describe London Zoo.
- It was home to the world's first insect and reptile house and the first-ever public aquarium – another word that didn't exist before London Zoo coined it.
- Jumbo, the first live elephant ever seen in England, moved to the Zoo in 1865 – and soon gave his name to anything oversized (so we have ZSL to thank for the jumbo jet!).

● If you'd like to try your hand at being a zookeeper, both London and Whipsnade Zoos offer Keeper For A Day experiences for adults and children aged 11 and over. For more information, visit zsl.org/k4d

Photos: Ben Lister