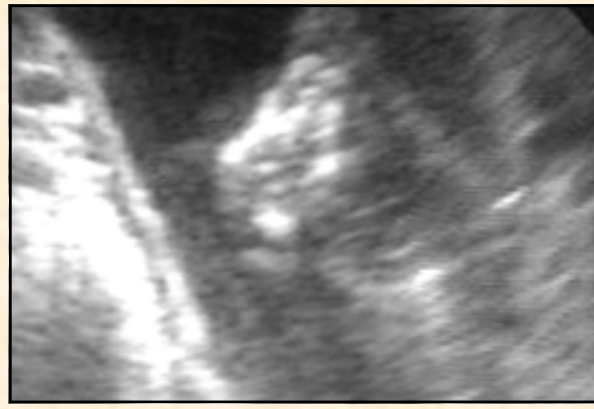


88 Days Gestation



104 Days Gestation

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## A Guinea Pig and Seven Rhinos

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“So, do they eat meat?” a zoo guest asked me one day as I chatted with eager children asking me questions all at once. The query took me a back two fold. Not only was this a question that I have never had to answer before, but the guest inquiring was an adult. A rapid succession of thoughts poured through my brain as I prepared to answer her. “Surely this was just a question she was asking for her children,” I thought. “Could someone really grow up and live a third of their adult life not knowing that rhinos are strict herbivores?” I quickly came to the conclusion that this woman truly did not know what the black rhino before her ate. Later that afternoon I filed through my mental Roladex® of rhino facts and experiences and thought about my role both as a keeper and an educator. I thought about the many people who settle into their jobs/careers (including myself at times, and this was one of those times) and forget that the general public does not know what keepers know. Even though the woman with the meat question earlier in the day clearly knew less than I did about rhinos, I realized that at four and a half years into my zoo career I too still had many unanswered questions about these prehistoric-looking creatures.

Thanks to that one naive rhino question, I was once again thirsting for more information from colleagues with more years of experience. I turned to the Rhino Keeper Association (now IRKA) website for more resources. As a professional member of the Association, I frequented this resource for up and coming news. As the website progressed, so did the goals of the IRKA, including a new program, the Keeper Professional Development Program. The website read “...(the) program will provide rhino keepers the opportunity to expand their knowledge and husbandry experience. This program has been designed to enable rhino keepers to work at other institutions to familiarize themselves with different management styles.” This was *IT!* This program was exactly what I needed to aid my career growth.

In October of 2006, my Director at the Racine Zoo requested that all proposals be submitted for the following year. I immediately wrote down workshops and programs that interested me. I narrowed my choices down to two, the IRKA Program and the SOS Rhino Sumatran Rhino Survey in Borneo. What the heck, I thought, why not write up proposals for both opportunities, I have nothing to lose and everything to gain. To my amazement, the Racine Zoo’s President and CEO (Jay Christie) and Director of Conservation, Education and Animal Welfare (Eric Hileman) granted me the support I needed to attend both of my professional development/travel opportunities. As the buzz began wearing off, I focused on contacting the appropriate people. Of the four hosting institutions (Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Garden, The Wilds, Columbus Zoo and Aquarium, and San Diego Zoo’s Wild Animal Park) I applied to spend a week at the Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Garden to gain additional knowledge of the species that I care for (Eastern black) and the species that I was crossing my fingers to encounter in the wild (Sumatran rhino, Borneo subspecies). Randy Pairan (Head Keeper, Ungulate Department at the Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Garden and IRKA Board of Directors member) guided me through the application process. Upon my first discussion with Randy, I learned that I was the first keeper to participate in the program; theoretically, I was the guinea pig and Randy’s team, the laboratory. Randy and I discussed the best time for my participation and settled on April 8<sup>th</sup> through the 12<sup>th</sup>.

As the weeks counted down, my anticipation of gathering new information steadily increased. What I didn’t know was that I was not going to be the only rhino keeper learning from the experience. I thought that everyone at Cincinnati would flood

me with a wealth of information and that anything I knew would just be old hat to them. Fortunately for all, that was not the case.

My first morning on the job was an early and brisk Easter Sunday. The sun had just breached the horizon as I crossed the street from the Intern House onto Cincy Zoo grounds. I made my way past the bronze rhino sculpture, around several peafowl, down a gentle slope until I reached the African Veldt. A wooden service gate had been left unlocked for me and the back door to the building was slightly ajar. Upon opening the door I had two options, forward down a ramp or up a flight of stairs. The light at the top of the stairs looked like a good bet. As I reached the top of the stairs a bright and cheery voice welcomed me in. Wendy had just checked on all of the animals and was gearing up for a heavy workload because the section was to run with a skeleton crew today. Jason soon followed my footsteps and the three of us chatted for a bit before getting dirty. In hopes of having a bit of extra time to tour parts of the zoo, Sunday was a rather hurried day as we scrambled to get all the animals cared for and everything done. The three of us had many things to talk about as the day went on and I felt that I had made the right choice to come to Cincinnati.

During my stay with the Ungulate staff, I was able to observe a rectal ultrasound of the ovaries in a very large Indian rhino named "Chitwan". As long as "Chitwan" had biscuits as a reward, she didn't mind being in the giant chute powered by an archaic water cylinder system. "Chitwan's" barn mate, "Nikki", and I became very good friends, but perhaps I thought she was much more interesting than she found me to be. "Nikki" really didn't seem to care that I thought her huge Indian rhino lips were the coolest lips I had ever touched but she, like most rhinos, just wanted some quality scratches as well as any food that I could offer her.

Cincy also houses two black rhinos, "Marshall" and "Julie". The dispositions of these two rhinos are quite different from the two that I have worked with. "Marshall" embodies the stereotypical view of a black rhino with a dash of a gentle curious cat. "Julie" is old, 39 years old to be exact, and it took her quite a while to shift from stall to stall, I suppose that she contemplates each movement these days, hoping that the value of reinforcement for moving supercedes any discomfort underneath all of her wrinkly folds. Wendy, Jason and I had great conversations and exchanges of information on diet, diseases and training. Since the Racine Zoo is such a small zoo when lined up next to the Cincinnati Zoo, and one of the advantages to being a smaller zoo is that the keepers become more involved in procedures such as stepping up as a vet assistant as needed. For instance, the keepers at the Cincinnati Zoo train for the phlebotomy procedures, but the actual blood collection is performed by a vet tech; whereas at the Racine Zoo, I am responsible for training and collecting blood on the female rhino since we've found that the success of blood collection occurs faster when the variables are minimized (i.e. we cut out the "third person").

"Ipuh", "Emi", and "Suci" are the hairiest rhinos I have ever seen, not to mention the smallest and most vocal. These three Sumatran rhinos are messy masters of their domain. "Ipuh" has managed to cover every possible surface with urine and his artistry puts the rhino barn that I work in to shame. I found myself absolutely fascinated with these mini hairy rhinos, hoping more than ever that I would see these elusive creatures in their natural habitat. During my time with these chatty rhinos, "Emi" was pregnant with "Harapan" but she was not due for another 1-2 weeks. Never the less, the first time encounter with these animals of habit was fabulously informative. Greg, one of the Sumatran rhino keepers often found him self stumped for additional way to enrich these rhinos. Greg and I bantered back and forth about enrichment and training, both gaining a new perspective on each other's view points. I plopped some of "Emi's" apples into her water trough one morning and Greg and I observed intently, giggled as "Emi" submerged her face in the trough, blew some bubbles and mouthed at the apples. This was a touching moment for me, to observe a fellow keeper's eyes light up at "Emi's" inquisitive behavior.

In addition to these superb rhino encounters, red river hogs were born during my stay, I assisted Randy with a yellow-backed duiker shipment and the Zoo's Cat Show Ambassador serval kittens bounded about the Intern House with me. In addition, many of the Zoo's departments welcomed me into their domains and gladly introduced me to aardvarks, manatees, elephants, white lions, and many other species.

During my week with the animals and people of the Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Garden, I became revived with the "kid in a candy store" feeling. Even though I had been working with some of the same species as I did at home, this change of environment put back into perspective how truly special my job is. When I left Cincinnati for home, I carried with me a folder full of articles, pictures, a rhino painting, and a list of resources to share with the Racine Zoo's staff (and possibly the "meat lady" if I ever see her again). By far the most valuable experience for me was forging new and wonderful friendships (both animal and human) and having thought provoking discussions on how to better rhino management skills. The Rhino Keeper Professional Development Program is still in its infancy and the events that occurred during my week with the rhinos will help to shape the future of the program to better fit the needs of the individuals and institutions participating. I strongly recommend this experience to anyone who is feeling the need to revive their passion, as well as keepers looking to broaden their knowledge base of rhino husbandry.

**If you would like to learn more about the Keeper Professional Development Program, please contact Randy Pairin at [rpd1172@yahoo.com](mailto:rpd1172@yahoo.com)**

**Be on the lookout for the next newsletter in December!**

