

## Rhinos, Elephants and Bears... Oh My! By: Ray Hren

There comes a time in everyone's career when you need a new set of ideas and way at looking at things. After taking care of black rhinos at the Milwaukee County Zoo for the last twelve years, I thought it was time to gain a new perspective. I thought what better way than to take advantage of the International Rhino Keeper Associations Professional Keeper Development Program. Out of the four choices (San Diego WAP, Cincinnati Zoo, The Wilds, and Columbus Zoo) Columbus Zoo seemed to be the best fit since they have black rhinos, and the rhino keepers also take care of elephants as we do at the Milwaukee County Zoo. I would be able to check out their elephant program while learning about the rhino program as well.

Upon arrival in Columbus, I was picked up at the airport and taken to the Columbus Zoo's late 19<sup>th</sup> century farmhouse, where interns and visiting professionals stay. I was a little hesitant when I heard the house was haunted. Luckily, I didn't experience any ghosts during my stay. After settling in, I was taken to the zoo's pachyderm barn, where I was told that I came at an exciting time. My visit coincided with the arrival of three visiting Asian elephants from the Buffalo Zoo, where they are renovating their elephant barn. The night before, two out of the three females had already arrived. I had the opportunity to watch the unloading of the third female arriving early the next morning. I was definitely tired waking up around three a.m., but I was treated to a smooth and efficient elephant unload. The other two female Asian elephants from Buffalo where excited to reunite with their herd mate. The rest of Columbus Zoo's large pachyderm house was abuzz with the new visitors as well.

The rest of my stay, I shadowed on the daily duties of the black rhino and Asian elephant beats with zookeepers Adam, Matt, Laura, and Heather and learned a lot about their routines. It was refreshing to learn a different routine since I've only worked at one zoo my whole career. I learned a lot about differences in diets, cleaning, training, and enrichment. My favorite training demonstration with the rhinos was a training session for a mock head x-ray with Matt training.

I was impressed with how still Kulinda the black rhino held steady with a ladder nearby for desensitization. Another exciting day was the weekly blood draw where the Columbus Zoo's veterinarian Dr. Gwen Myers drew blood from all the black rhinos and Asian elephants. I was a little intimidated, being a protected contact elephant keeper, stepping inside with their 5-6 ton Asian bull elephant "CoCo". I got to hunch down between his rear legs and feel the vein collection site. Unfortunately, I felt like a bad luck charm, because they had a hard time drawing blood on a few animals. Boy, do I know those days! Luckily, they were 100% successful the next day without me around.

I also got a chance to see some other areas. As a pachyderm keeper in Milwaukee, I have three different beats that I rotate into and care for a variety of animals including: African elephants, Nile hippos, warthog, reticulated giraffes, black rhinos, Asiatic black bear, Malayan tapir, and bongo antelope. So it was nice to see a couple other areas during my four day stay. I got the chance to hang out with Troy, who takes care of the sun bears, to see what kind of husbandry ideas I could bring back to our Asiatic black bear. I was very impressed with Columbus Zoo's new Asia Quest building where the sun bear exhibit is located. Talk about spacious, with its indoor two story sun bear exhibit with climbing logs bisecting the floors, and the nice outdoor exhibit with grass, trees, waterfall, and pool. Troy gave me some background on their bear training, enrichment, and exhibit design. I also got to visit the okapi barn. I've always been fascinated by these shy animals, and was interested to learn more about them. Dr. Myers invited me to observe a North American otter pup work-up, where I got the chance to hold a few of the pups. What can I say? I'm still a sucker for that kind of stuff!

Taking part in the International Rhino Keeper Association Keeper Professional Keeper Development Program was definitely the jumpstart I needed. I came back to Milwaukee with a list of new ideas for enrichment, diet, exhibit design, and training. It was refreshing to learn all the nuances of a different zoo, routine, and pachyderm team. I enjoyed sharing stories and ideas. I'd like to thank Adam Felts and the rest of the Columbus Zoo staff for making my stay a comfortable one. From picking and dropping me off at the airport, housing me, and enjoyable dinner company at various restaurants. I definitely recommend this program to everyone in the field. Not only can you learn more about rhino management, but also with other animals in your charges.



Blood draw on male Asian Coco



Black rhino at Columbus Zoo



Otter pup evaluation and workup