Chief Veterinarian and Director of Animal Care

Job Classification: Exempt
Reports Directly To: Chief Executive Officer (Executive Leadership Team)

A rare opportunity: Lead the creation of a brand-new, on-site veterinary clinic-funded through a successful capital campaign, guide the park on it's path to accreditation, and care for native and historically significant species, including our bison and elk herds.

Park Overview

Wildlife Prairie Park is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to conservation, education, and recreation. Located on approximately 1800 acres in Central Illinois, the Park provides a unique setting where visitors can experience Illinois' natural and cultural heritage. The Park offers educational and recreational programs, and provides opportunities for visitors to connect with nature. The Park is located just west of Peoria, in a region known for its low cost of living, affordable housing and easy access to the amenities of the Peoria area.

Wildlife Prairie Park is committed to responsible animal care, conservation, environmental stewardship, and quality guest experiences. The Park's animal programs play an important role in advancing its conservation and educational mission while providing visitors with meaningful opportunities to learn about Illinois wildlife and natural resources.

Position Summary

The Chief Veterinarian and Director of Animal Care is the Park's senior authority for veterinary medicine and animal welfare and provides strategic leadership and accountability for the Animal Care Department, ensuring every aspect of the department meets or exceeds professional, accreditation and regulatory standards, from animal health and husbandry to enclosure safety, staff safety and records. As a member of the Executive Leadership Team, this position will not work alone: it leads supervisory staff and a team of Animal Care Specialists who carry out daily animal care, allowing the Director to focus on veterinary medicine, animal welfare and leading the department. We are looking for an accomplished clinician and a strong leader who builds trust and an accountable, respectful team culture; coaches and develops people; is visible on grounds; communicates clearly and follows through; and drives change to measurable results, with the tenacity and vision to open our new veterinary facility and lead the Park to accreditation

Essential Duties and Responsibilities

- Champion animal welfare by ensuring every animal receives care that meets or exceeds professional standards, leading a formal welfare assessment program, ensuring any staff member can raise welfare concerns and have them reviewed objectively, and using welfare to guide decisions on husbandry, habitats and the collection.

- Directly supervise, coach and hold accountable the department's supervisory staff and Animal Care Specialists, and lead animal department volunteers, through clear supervision, training, performance expectations and timely corrective action in partnership with Human Resources.
- Set annual departmental priorities, goals, performance expectations and measurable outcomes for animal care, veterinary services, conservation, compliance, safety, staffing and operations.
- Ensure animal care, safety, records and operations meet or exceed ZAA, USDA, IDNR, , OSHA and other applicable requirements, and maintain inspection-ready compliance.
- Conduct routine documented inspections of enclosures, habitats, barriers, gates, locks and shift systems, and prioritize and correct deficiencies identified by inspections and safety assessments with Maintenance on clear timelines.
- Maintain final clinical authority and provide or oversee preventive, diagnostic, therapeutic, surgical, emergency, quarantine and end-of-life veterinary care, coordinating relief coverage with partner veterinary practices.
- Establish veterinary standards for biosecurity, zoonotic disease prevention, pharmacy and controlled substances, and medical records, including ZIMS for Medical.
- Coach the animal care team to provide daily husbandry, enrichment, nutrition, behavioral management and habitats, and guide collection planning, acquisitions, transfers, breeding and population management, including the bison and elk herds.
- Lead the design, equipment, workflows, staffing, budget and opening of the new on-site veterinary facility.
- Develop, implement and enforce SOPs, policies, safety practices, emergency preparedness plans and drills; review incidents and near misses; and implement corrective actions.
- Plan staffing, scheduling, training and leadership coverage, and manage departmental and veterinary budgets, purchasing priorities, grants and financial sustainability initiatives.
- Serve on the Executive Leadership Team and advise the CEO on animal health, welfare, veterinary risk, policy, budgets and long-range planning.
- Partner with Maintenance, Education and other departments, and represent Wildlife Prairie Park professionally with regulators, conservation partners, universities and the veterinary and zoological community.

Knowledge, Skills & Abilities

- *Leadership competency:* builds trust, sets clear expectations, coaches and develops leaders, manages performance and maintains accountability across teams.

- *Animal welfare competency:* applies science-based welfare assessment and ensures welfare guides departmental decisions.
- *Veterinary competency:* applies advanced clinical knowledge of zoological, wildlife and mixed-species medicine, surgery, anesthesia, diagnostics, preventive care and biosecurity.
- *Animal care competency:* applies advanced knowledge of husbandry, enrichment, nutrition, behavior and collection management.
- *Compliance and safety competency:* understands accreditation, USDA Animal Welfare Act, permit, controlled-substance, enclosure safety and inspection requirements.
- *Operational competency:* designs and improves SOPs, policies, workflows, records and systems that support consistent departmental performance.
- *Strategic competency:* plans proactively, manages priorities and connects departmental work to organizational goals.
- *Problem-solving competency:* identifies risks, analyzes deficiencies, makes sound decisions under pressure and drives corrective action and continuous improvement.
- *Communication competency:* communicates clearly with employees, leadership, the Board, partners, regulators, volunteers and community stakeholders.
- *Financial and administrative competency:* manages budgets, resources, documentation, construction and project timelines effectively.

Minimum Qualifications

- DVM, VMD or equivalent veterinary degree from an accredited institution required.
- Current Illinois veterinary license, or the ability to obtain one within six months of hire, including state and DEA controlled-substance registrations, required.
- Zoological, wildlife, large-animal or mixed-species clinical experience required.
- Minimum of three (3) years of supervisory, management or departmental leadership experience, with a proven record of building and leading accountable, high-performing teams, required.
- Demonstrated commitment to science-based animal welfare required.
- Knowledge of USDA Animal Welfare Act requirements, biosecurity, emergency response and safety standards required.
- Zoological veterinary experience preferred..
- Board certification by the American College of Zoological Medicine or another relevant specialty preferred.
- Experience building or managing a veterinary clinic, leading organizational change, or preparing for ZAA or AZA accreditation preferred.

- Experience with ZIMS/Species360 and with hoofstock, carnivores or native wildlife preferred or willingness to learn.
- Valid Illinois driver's license required.

Physical Demands & Working Conditions

Work is performed in office, clinical, animal care, habitat and outdoor environments and may involve varying weather conditions, animals, chemicals, controlled substances, biological materials and other occupational hazards associated with zoological and veterinary operations.

The position requires regular walking, standing, bending, reaching, kneeling, climbing and lifting up to 50 pounds, along with the physical functions of veterinary practice. Evening, weekend, holiday and after-hours work may be required based on operational and medical needs.

Reasonable accommodations will be made in accordance with applicable law.