

## **Director of Animal Care and Conservation**

**Status:** Full-Time, Exempt

**Location:** Wildlife Prairie Park – Hanna City, IL

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### **Position Summary**

Wildlife Prairie Park has often been referred to as a jewel in the Midwest. Located just outside of Peoria, IL, this 1,800-acre zoological park is home to more than 180 animals representing over 60 native Illinois species, including wolves, bison, black bear, elk, cougars, and otters. Since opening in 1978, Wildlife Prairie Park has remained dedicated to its mission of conservation, education, and recreation.

The Director of Animal Care and Conservation is a key member of the executive team, responsible for the strategic direction, leadership, and daily management of the Park's animal care, conservation and education programs. This position advances animal welfare, habitat management, staff performance and development, educational programming while leading the Park toward ZAA accreditation. The Director ensures compliance with all zoological regulatory agencies, partners with veterinary professionals, fosters community and professional engagement, and implements sustainable practices that create an enriching environment for animals, guests, and staff.

This role also plays a vital part in revenue development through innovative programs, partnerships, and collaborations that attract funding opportunities and support attendance growth. The Director works closely with the executive team to ensure strategic alignment, cohesive leadership, and operational excellence across the Park while upholding the highest ethical standards in animal care and conservation.

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### **Essential Duties and Responsibilities**

#### **Leadership & Strategic Vision**

- Align animal and education department objectives with the Park's strategic plan, ensuring individual staff goals support departmental priorities.
- Develop and manage comprehensive project plans and timelines to ensure successful completion of multiple projects.
- Lead ZAA accreditation efforts within the animal and education departments, ensuring readiness, documentation, and compliance with USDA and all applicable zoological regulatory agencies.

- Conduct regular departmental meetings and staff check-ins to ensure communication, accountability, and progress toward goals.
- Provide strategic input to the executive team on animal care, conservation, research, and education.
- Develop and enforce departmental SOPs to ensure consistent, safe, and compliant practices.
- Promote a culture of excellence, innovation, collaboration, and continuous growth that empowers staff to take initiative and embrace positive change.
- Foster an inclusive workplace that values diversity, equity, and ensures equitable opportunities for staff, volunteers, and interns.
- Establish and track KPIs to measure animal welfare, regulatory compliance, and education program impact.
- Mentor and develop departmental leaders, ensuring succession planning and professional growth opportunities through conferences and other organizational learning opportunities.
- Communicate departmental vision clearly to staff and represent zoological operations to the CEO.
- Attend conferences, workshops and other professional development opportunities.
- Attend department meetings, board meetings etc.
- Other duties as assigned.

### **Animal Welfare & Operations**

- Provide oversight of husbandry, enrichment, training, and behavioral care to meet or exceed professional standards.
- Ensure proper use of ZIMS/Species360 through staff training, compliance audits, and accurate reporting for accreditation and decision-making.
- Manage animal collection planning, acquisitions, transfers, and documentation in accordance with ethical, regulatory, and accreditation standards.
- Collaborate with veterinary providers on preventive health programs, treatments, and emergency care while ensuring USDA compliance.
- Implement animal welfare assessments and ensure adherence to ZAA/AZA standards.
- Maintain quarantine, biosecurity, and disease prevention protocols for all species.
- Oversee permitting, transport, and regulatory compliance for animal acquisitions, transfers, and dispositions.
- Support staff in the use of positive reinforcement training programs to enhance husbandry and veterinary procedures.
- Lead long-term collection and exhibit planning to advance conservation goals, guest engagement, and educational impact.
- Ensure compliance with USDA, IDNR, AZA/ZAA, OSHA (as applicable to animal operations), and other federal, state, and local regulations.

### **Education, Research & Conservation**

- Provide vision and oversight for education and conservation programming to ensure alignment with the Park's mission and strategic plan.
- Collaborate with the marketing department to integrate conservation messaging into programs, exhibits, and interpretive materials.
- Oversee the development and evaluation of curricula, interpretive messaging, and public programs for accuracy, accessibility, and mission alignment.
- Expand public engagement opportunities such as animal encounters, keeper talks, behind-the-scenes tours, and presentations that promote conservation awareness, guest experience and generates revenue.
- Build and maintain strong partnerships with schools, universities, conservation organizations, and community groups to expand reach and impact.
- Mentor education staff in best practices for conservation education, interpretation, and guest engagement.
- Identify and pursue conservation-based research opportunities and partnerships with academic institutions, government agencies, and conservation organizations.
- Ensure all research conducted at the Park meets ethical, legal, and institutional standards.
- Collaborates with the development department for external funding to support education, conservation, and research initiatives.
- Translate conservation science and research into accessible content for guests, volunteers, and stakeholders.

### **Personnel Management**

- Supervise, mentor, and evaluate departmental leads and staff, fostering accountability, collaboration, and professional growth
- Grow the internship program for succession planning purpose.
- Conduct weekly one-on-one meetings with supervisors and daily team meetings to ensure operational alignment and communication.
- Ensure appropriate staffing levels and workforce planning to support animal and education operations and accreditation standards.
- Collaborate with HR to create and implement professional development pathways, leadership training, and succession planning.
- Provide consistent and fair performance management through annual reviews, ongoing feedback, and corrective action as needed.
- Promote a strong safety culture by ensuring staff receive training in OSHA standards, animal care protocols, and emergency procedures.
- Model effective communication, transparency, and conflict resolution to maintain a respectful workplace.

### **Financial & Grant Management**

- Develop and manage departmental operating budgets in partnership with the CFO, ensuring fiscal responsibility and alignment with Park-wide goals.

- Monitor expenses, track performance against budget, and identify cost efficiencies without compromising animal welfare or staff safety.
- Develop and oversee revenue-generating initiatives tied to animal programs, education, tours, and guest experiences.
- Support Identification, writing and administration of grants to support animal care, research, conservation, and education programs, ensuring compliance with reporting requirements.
- Participate in capital planning to identify long-term zoological facility needs and ensure sustainability of departmental operations.
- Use data-driven decision-making to evaluate ROI and ensure responsible resource allocation.

## **Facilities & Enclosures**

- Ensure animal habitats and enclosures meet or exceed standards for safety, welfare, enrichment, and cleanliness.
- Ensure proper tools, equipment and training are completed to ensure animal department staff are maintaining animal habitats.
- Oversee preventive maintenance, inspections, and repairs of habitats, life-support systems, and animal care facilities.
- Lead habitat renovation, construction, and upgrade projects in collaboration with facilities and grounds staff.
- Integrate sustainability practices and innovative designs into habitats to minimize environmental impact while enhancing animal welfare.
- Ensure exhibits incorporate guest engagement and education while prioritizing animal well-being.
- Oversee pasture management, herd health, and sustainability of the Park's bison and elk herds.
- Lead herd development initiatives in partnership with the National Bison Association and other conservation partners.
- Plan and implement an on-site animal clinic to support preventive care, medical procedures, and accreditation readiness.
- Participate in capital planning and fundraising efforts tied to zoological operations.

## **Emergency Preparedness and Safety**

- Develop and maintain animal- and education-specific emergency response plans in alignment with the Park's crisis response framework led by the COO.
- Conduct routine safety drills and training for zoological staff.
- Ensure compliance with OSHA and Illinois workplace safety standards.
- Coordinate with local emergency responders to strengthen partnerships and protocols.
- Collaborate with leadership on crisis communication to ensure timely and transparent messaging to staff, stakeholders, and the public.

## **Public Relations & Community Engagement**

- Represent the Park at professional conferences, community forums, and media events.
  - Serve as spokesperson for animal care, conservation, and education matters.
  - Develop and promote guest-facing programs (specialty tours, donor experiences, conservation events) that enhance mission impact and generate revenue.
  - Build partnerships with conservation and education organizations to expand visibility and impact.
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## **Required Qualifications**

- Bachelor's degree in Zoology, Biology, Animal Science, or related field required; Master's preferred.
  - Minimum of 7–10 years of progressive leadership in zoological operations, with significant supervisory experience.
  - Experience with AZA or ZAA accreditation strongly preferred.
  - Demonstrated record of research involvement, conservation partnerships, and successful grant acquisition.
  - Advanced knowledge of animal welfare, enrichment, husbandry, collection planning, and regulatory compliance.
  - Proficiency in ZIMS/Species360 and ability to analyze data for decision-making.
  - Strong leadership, interpersonal, and organizational skills with the ability to motivate and develop staff.
  - Strong Project Management skills.
  - Excellent verbal and written communication skills, including public speaking and media relations.
  - Proven ability to manage budgets and secure external funding.
  - Valid Illinois Driver's License.
  - Ability to work outdoors year-round in varied weather conditions.
  - Ability to lift up to 50 pounds.
  - Flexibility to work evenings, weekends, holidays, and on-call as needed.
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## **Preferred Qualifications**

- Master's degree in Zoology, Animal Science, Wildlife Management, or related discipline.
- Experience in capital project planning related to zoological facilities.
- Professional affiliations with AZA, ZAA, or related conservation organizations.

- Experience developing donor engagement programs tied to animal care and conservation initiatives.