



Where Is She Heading

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## **What Does It Take To Be A Good Animal Volunteer?**

There are so many ways volunteers can help agencies that work with animals. Not all the volunteer work has to be done directly with the animals. This allows for a wide range of volunteers to enjoy helping the animals but not necessarily ending up being covered in hair and wet sloppy animal kisses. That being said, many volunteer want to have the opportunity to get up close and personal with the furred, finned or feathered beauties.

**Love of animals** is of course important, but at times, a volunteer needs balanced expectations. The work can be strenuous with more time spent cleaning cages and preparing food than petting the animals and taking care of the babies. The hours can be very long, especially if there is not sufficient help. When it comes to comfort, some agencies adopt the credo that the animals come first and the staff and volunteers come second.

**Patience** is extremely important not only with the animals, but also with your coworkers and at times, the public. When you locate an agency that interests you, find out their mission and long-term goals and read everything available. Take a survey of your particular goals as you approach volunteering with animals and see if you will be comfortable working in community and with the public, or if you will be more content as a ‘behind the scenes’ person. Both are valuable and this information can help you locate an agency that fits you heart and style of volunteering.

**Animal Skills** can be acquired either with degrees or life experience. In some situations, even though you have or may feel you have the necessary skills and expertise, you may be asked to refrain from certain duties or defer to professionals such as Veterinarians or trained nurses. While you may be able to vaccinate or medicate your own animals at home, due to insurance or laws, volunteers may not be allowed to administer them when working for certain agencies. Ask before your first interaction. As much as you would like to touch them, there are many reasons why it will not always be possible for you to directly touch or handle the animals, especially if they will be released back into the wild.

**Perspective** can be very helpful. As you are probably aware, there can be a lot of emotion surrounding animals and their care, health and safety. Especially when working with the sick or injured animals, remember that not every animal may make it or be in the position to be returned to the wild. In the full circle of life, there is birth but there can also be death. If you think this might upset you, see if there are ways you can assist the agency without direct animal contact.

Most agencies spend so much time working with the animals and they need help with paperwork and office functions as well.

Learning to **take nothing personally** can really help an animal volunteer stay happy and balanced. At times, animals develop distinct preferences that have nothing to do with your value as a volunteer or quality as a person. From my personal experience for example, if the baboon prefers to be carried to the sleeping pen by a particular volunteer, I let it happen. It created calmness in the troop and I saved your hands and arms from being chewed and scratched!

### **Some animal agencies that need volunteers**

#### **In the US**

American Bear Association (Minnesota) – [www.americanbearassociation.com](http://www.americanbearassociation.com)

Gibbon Conservation Center (Los Angeles) – [www.gibboncenter.org](http://www.gibboncenter.org)

Elephant Sanctuary (Tennessee) – [www.elephantsanctuary.com](http://www.elephantsanctuary.com)

#### **Abroad**

Torre Argentina's Cat Sanctuary in Rome – [www.romancats.com](http://www.romancats.com)

Howler Monkey in Argentina - [www.volunteer-with-howler-monkeys.org](http://www.volunteer-with-howler-monkeys.org)

Sloths in Costa Rica – [www.slothrescue.org](http://www.slothrescue.org)

There is nothing like volunteering with animals if that is your call. Do your external and internal research to make sure you are comfortable with the agency and have found a good match with your volunteer goals.

Travel in Safety.

Jane Stanfield