

Lions and tigers and bears ... Oh My!

Written by Deb Egenberger
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Gothenburg graduate lands dream job cuddling baby animals.

For as long as Lindsey Weiss can remember, she has wanted to have a job that allowed her to work with animals.

In fact, the 2005 Gothenburg High School graduate once planned on becoming a marine biologist so she could train killer whales and dolphins.

“But I have this really weird phobia of touching dead fish,” Weiss said.

Parents Lorri and Matt Weiss of Gothenburg told her she would have to handle fish to feed whales.

“I told them that I would just wear gloves,” she said. “I really thought it was something I would grow out of.”

With age, that fear is not as prominent but it did lead Weiss to another career path.

“My dad always joked that if I could be the baby animal cuddler, that would be my perfect job,” Weiss said.

She is living her dream at The West Coast Game Park Safari in Bandon, OR.

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In August, Weiss finished her bachelor's degree in animal and veterinary sciences at the University of Wyoming. She'll receive her diploma in December.



Her ultimate goal was to become a veterinarian at a zoo but adding another four years of college right now didn't seem right. So last summer she started looking for jobs across the country.

"The biggest problem I encountered was, because of the economy, no one was hiring," Weiss said. "People that were hiring wanted at least three years of experience. How do they expect people to get experience if they don't hire anyone?"

Lorri Weiss ran across The West Coast Game Park Safari on an Internet search.

"They were willing to hire me without the experience since I had a great animal background," Weiss said.

The West Coast Game Park Safari is a privately-owned zoo on the ocean coast of Oregon which allows visitors a unique experience of meeting, mingling and petting wildlife of all kinds.

Weiss is an animal handler/animal caretaker. Daily duties include cleaning out enclosures, feeding the animals (wallabies, foxes, baboons, lemurs and emus just to name a few) and doing shows with the public.

"We bring out the babies, let visitors interact with them and educate them about what the animal is," Weiss said.

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Because the animals are shown and touched daily by the public, Weiss said the babies are all hand raised.

That means animals go home from work with Weiss every day.

“When I first started I was allowed to take home some of the smaller animals at the park,” she said.

The first baby critters in her apartment were a fox named Todd, a skunk named Daisy and a raccoon named Luna.



“They were all so much fun.”

She has since been put in charge of caring for two male baby Bengal tigers named Kimbo and Titan which are about a month old.

“During the day they are at the park for showing but at night they go home with me,” Weiss said. “I am the only one allowed to take them home so they are my babies.”

Weiss said babies at the game park are taken away from their mothers when they are roughly nine days old.

“This is before their eyes are open so that when they do open their eyes, we are the first things

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they see," she said. "To the tiger cubs, I am their mom. This is just easier on everyone."

The process helps in training the animals as they get older.

"To them, I am a parent so they listen to me a little better than if I wasn't," she said. "It's also easier on the mother. Since we let visitors interact with the babies we aren't constantly taking them away from mom then putting them back then taking them away again."

The tigers are likely to be easier to handle and train because of being hand raised.

"They have been around people all their lives and they don't see us as a threat," Weiss said.

All babies are leash trained and with that they get voice commands.

"They learn at an early age that they can't bite people," she said.

Visitors don't interact with the babies after 6 months of age but park staff continues to work with them.

Weiss said most of the babies born at the park go on to other zoos and animal facilities across the country.

"We work with over 70 different zoos," she said. "This way, blood lines are preserved and places don't get inbreeding."

Since most of the park's animals are threatened or endangered, Weiss said it also helps

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re-populate species that could become extinct.

Over the summer, a baby African spotted leopard cub named Bentley was born along with two African Lion cubs, a boy Moomba and girl Bella.

“Both Moomba and Bella have already left for other zoos so that was pretty hard to say goodbye,” Weiss said. “You get very attached.”

For others interested in a similar line of work, Weiss strongly suggests pairing an internship with instruction.

She worked a summer at the Henry Doorly Zoo in Omaha in the jungle area.

“That experience really opened my eyes to what it takes to be a zoo keeper,” Weiss said. “I knew I wanted to be really hands on with animals.”

An internship, she said, will either make or break you.

“You have to love animals,” she said, “and with animals comes getting bit, scratched and there is always a lot of poop. It’s been worth it, though. I am finally the baby animal cuddler!”