

Working With Reptiles

Place yourself into one (or more) of these reptile jobs and careers working with reptiles.

By Tom Barthel

Choosing a career is never easy, and you may not think you can craft an entire life's work from your enthusiasm for reptiles — but countless people do just that. Read on for descriptions of some possible career choices, and the steps you can take to place yourself into one (or more) of these reptile-related professions.

Zookeeper

A career as a zookeeper can be a very rewarding and challenging profession for reptile enthusiasts to pursue. The American Association of Zoo Keepers (AAZK) defines a zookeeper as an individual who works hands-on with animals in a zoo setting to ensure the animals are healthy and happy. Zookeepers play important roles in captive-breeding programs, conservation efforts, research, public education and the enjoyment of zoo visitors. Everyday duties may include everything from animal care and feeding to enclosure cleaning, design and maintenance.

As far as interactions with reptiles go, this field is somewhat unique. Although zookeepers are often responsible for making sure their animals receive the best care, interaction and handling isn't necessarily encouraged. Many of the reptiles on display in zoos are endangered in the wild or are part of captive-breeding programs, so zookeepers must be very careful with their charges. Additionally, many of these animals are quite capable of harming the zookeepers themselves, so these professionals must limit their physical interactions with them.

Interaction with the general public is also required. Zookeepers are on the front lines of public relations as they go about their work. They may often be required to take time out to answer questions and educate zoogoers about the animals in their care.

In most cases, landing a job as a zookeeper requires a college degree. The courses you choose and previous volunteer experience you have can greatly improve your chances. A major in zoology, biology or an animal-related field, such as conservation or animal training management is highly recommended, not to mention taking as many herpetology courses as you can. In your free time, or before entering college, it would also be a good idea to obtain volunteer or internship experience in the reptile house at a zoo near you. Veterinary hospital experience is also recommended. A job in a reptile department in a retail store could also help. Basically, the more experience you have with the animals, the better.

Zookeeper jobs can be hard to come by. There are a limited number of zoos in the country, and if you're hoping to stay in a particular geographic area, your opportunities may be even fewer. Professionals who do secure work tend to remain in their positions, on the forefront of education and conservation — it's easy to see why.

However, with the growing popularity of zoos and wild animal parks, there is much room for future growth in this field. Keep in mind that zoo animals must be cared for round the clock, which means zookeepers often work weekends, holidays and early morning shifts.

There is room for advancement into zoo management and administration roles where wages are higher, though these opportunities are often more limited than in other careers requiring college degrees.

Conservation

The field of conservation is also an attractive career option for many reptile enthusiasts. Ensuring the future survival of wild species can be a very worthwhile endeavor.

Possible conservation careers include a wide spectrum of jobs from working in a captive-breeding program at a zoo and field work in a foreign country to educating the public about the importance of protecting native species in their communities. These jobs are usually found at nonprofit organizations or with federal and state fish and wildlife organizations.

People who hold jobs in conservation often have four-year degrees from colleges or universities. Although not necessary in all cases, a four-year degree dramatically improves your chances of getting the position you want. The most common route to a job in conservation is a degree in environmental science, natural science, wildlife conservation/management or biology.

If you're looking for a job in reptile conservation specifically, courses that relate to herpetology can help you get a leg up on the competition. Also think about gaining personal experience caring for reptiles and completing volunteer work at a zoo or summer fish and wildlife program.

Federal conservation employees are paid on a graded scale. The more experience and education you have, the higher the pay you receive. The qualifications for pay scales are different from state to state.

The demand for reptile savvy conservationists is on the rise in southern states, such as Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, Georgia and the Carolinas, because human encroachment on alligator habitat has become increasingly common. There is a need for people willing to help find a way for the two species to live peacefully side by side.

"Herp School" List

Check out this list of universities that have long-standing reputations as good "herpetology schools." [Click Here>>](#)

Herpetology

Herpetology is the professional scientific study of reptiles and amphibians. A subfield of biology, it is a path pursued by many college and university professors who spend their careers studying and passing on their passion for reptiles. Herpetologists can have a wide range of roles from teaching and writing to conducting field research and acting as consultants for local zoos and conservation projects.

These professionals spend varying amounts of time directly working with reptiles. Herpetologists may spend time caring for animals in labs or zoos, observing them in the wild and examining museum specimens, or they may spend the majority of their time lecturing or writing about their findings.

Becoming an accredited herpetologist can be a long and difficult process. In the past, a person could become one simply by studying amphibians and reptiles independently in the wild or as pets, learning enough to secure jobs in zoos and museums. Today, the techniques used to study these complex animals are so advanced and the competition for jobs is so fierce that a degree in higher education is required.

"Herpetologists" don't typically follow herpetology courses at a four-year college. They often take courses to obtain master's or doctorate degrees in biology, anatomy, biochemistry, microbiology, physiology and the like. They can spend more than eight years getting their degrees. Past experience, independent studies or work with reptiles is what gives them the distinction of becoming herpetologists. The more experience and education a herpetologist has, the higher the income potential.

Herp Veterinarian

Becoming a veterinarian who specializes in treating reptiles is no less challenging. Many long years of study are required. But the end result can be the fulfillment of a lifelong dream — helping herp lovers care for their extraordinary pets.

Surprisingly enough, statistically, it is harder to get into veterinary school than it is to get into human medical school. The reason is the number of veterinary schools: There are only 27 in the country. Competition for admission into these programs is intense.

Why require a four-year degree in science and math, another four years in vet school, several years of internships and a long battery of tests? Because herp vets do it all. Most veterinarians own their own private practices, which means they must be pharmacists, radiologists, surgeons and dentists, among other things, for every animal that is kept as a pet. They must also be good businesspeople, who manage staff and invest in new equipment and medicines. A veterinarian's training is more diversified than a human doctor's. Just like doctors, veterinarians must continue to study even after their schooling is complete to keep up with changing trends and new technologies.

And, like doctors, veterinarians are often on call 24 hours a day, 365 days year, in the event of an emergency. Many work very long schedules without time off.

A vet becomes a reptile and amphibian vet by completing internships with established herp vets. These internships can last up to two years or more. Often, these vets join the Association of Reptilian and Amphibian Veterinarians (www.arav.com), a group that maintains a national directory of herp vets and conducts an annual conference on reptile medicine.

As more people discover the joys of owning reptiles and amphibians, the demand for herp vets grows. In fact, labor statistics indicate that veterinary medicine is one of the fastest growing fields in the country.

Veterinary Technician

According to the North American Veterinary Technician Association (NAVTA), a veterinary technician acts as the nurse of the veterinary world. As a “vet tech,” one can expect to perform a number of tasks from day to day, including recording patient histories, educating pet owners about proper animal care, administering medicines and vaccines to patients, examining specimens in the laboratory and conducting medical research, as well as assisting with X-rays, anesthesia, surgery and hospital/office administration.

The amount of one-on-one interaction you can expect to have with reptiles depends on where you choose to work. If you choose to work for an exotic veterinarian who specializes in reptiles, you would likely get the opportunity to work with herps often. However, remember exotic veterinarians still see and treat a number of cats and dogs, as well as other animals. So, if you are not fond of every type of companion animal, this job may not be for you.

Reptile programs at zoos and wildlife management organizations often require veterinary technicians. So, if you have volunteer or previous work experience with one of these groups, as well as a vet tech degree, you’ll have a better chance at making your dream a reality.

A career as a veterinary technician requires an investment in higher education. Take college prep courses in high school —this profession requires at least a two-year Associate of Science degree or a four-year Bachelor of Science. According to NAVTA, there are more than 100 veterinary technician programs at colleges and universities in the United States. Success at one of these programs, certified by the American Veterinary Medical Association, will go a long way in securing the career you want. Extensive testing is also required to gain certification in most states.

This field is rapidly growing. As a result, vet tech programs and related courses are cropping up at community colleges and universities around the country. There is a strong demand for veterinary technicians in private practices, zoo/wildlife medicine, diagnostic labs, veterinary supply sales and a variety of other specializations. This is a relatively new profession with great growth potential.

Annual income for veterinary technicians can vary depending on the type of work performed and the level of experience of the individual.

Professional Breeder

With all the careers available to herp enthusiasts that require hard work and expensive educations, often the most attractive choice seems to be a career in herptoculture. It’s still hard work, but you’re your own boss, you don’t need a degree and you can make lots of money.

Not so fast. The decision to professionally breed reptiles and amphibians is not to be taken lightly. This is a serious profession that requires just as much careful consideration and preparation as any other career. Breeders often spend long hours feeding and caring for animals, as well as conducting much research and networking to help them improve their products and businesses. They must have a solid knowledge of math, biology, anatomy, nutrition, sales, marketing, animal behavior and genetics, to name a few.

Though a degree isn’t necessarily required for a breeder to start a business, courses in math, science and sales could help you to be a better businessperson. A mentor — someone who does what you want to do and can take you under his or her wing — is essential. Ideally, you should work with a breeder/mentor for several years before starting your own business. This person can offer advice about breeding and can guide you.

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Large breeders sometimes hire animal caretakers. This would be a great way to find out if professional breeding is for you and the best way to learn the business from the ground up.

Wrap Up

It should be noted that this is not a complete picture of possible careers with reptiles. Other options might include biology teacher, wholesaler, importer/exporter, reptile publishing (writing, editing, publishing), herp photography, reptile store owner and other professions. Maybe you want to be the next Crocodile Hunter on television.

The most important factor to consider when choosing any career is your own personal motivation. Ask yourself why you want to go into a particular field. If your main reason for wanting a herp career is a love of reptiles and amphibians, than a herp job could be your dream job. Find your passion, and plot your course.