

# Ambulatory Zoo Practice



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## KEYWORDS

• Ambulatory • Zoo • Mobile • Field • Anesthesia

## KEY POINTS

- Ambulatory zoologic practice carries many challenges due to myriad species that may need veterinary care; therefore, proper preparedness is key.
- The necessary equipment, medications, and supplies should either accompany the veterinarian or be available at the site where the work is performed.
- Knowledge of the care and feeding of these animals and the legalities of owning and working with them is imperative.
- Being able to address medical and surgical issues in a field setting is a necessary skill for the ambulatory zoo veterinarian to master.

## INTRODUCTION

Because of myriad species that may be seen in a zoologic setting, proper preparedness for the veterinary needs of these animals is imperative. The veterinary care of aquatic, avian, and herpetological species in a zoologic setting is similar, with the possible exception of ratites, storks and cranes, giant tortoises, crocodilians, larger fish species (eg, sharks and rays), and the like. This article primarily focuses on the veterinary care of exotic mammals that may be found in a zoologic setting.

## THE CLIENT

Most large zoos, safari parks, aquariums, and animal theme parks and, even some private collections have resident veterinarians and designated veterinary facilities to provide medical and surgical care for their animals. Some smaller zoos, however, even if publicly owned, may not have neither the collection size nor budget to warrant employing a full-time veterinarian. These zoos often contract with a local veterinarian to provide services either on a regular or as-needed basis. Privately owned collections of nontraditional species also tend to operate in this manner. Some traditional farms may branch out into exotic animals, and there are also situations where an individual chooses to own a small number of exotic animals that cannot be practically

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transported to a veterinarian when care is needed. The author has clients who use a local veterinarian for routine work for the more common species kept and then contact the author if specialized care is needed for the more unique species.

### **THE BUSINESS**

Veterinarians who have zoologic experience, are board certified (ie, American College of Zoological Medicine (ACZM), European College of Zoological Medicine (ECZM), or American Board of Veterinary Practitioners (ABVP)), or work in practices with a reputation for dealing with nontraditional species may be approached by a zoologic collection owner or manager who needs their services, particularly if they advertise themselves as such. Practitioners who are just starting out in the field of zoologic medicine and surgery may want to reach out to local zoologic facilities directly and offer their services. If veterinarians are inexperienced with the species that a local zoo keeps, they may want to offer to volunteer their time to learn about those species, because it may open a door for future gainful employment.

To stay in business, veterinarians must charge appropriately for their services; this also holds true for ambulatory zoo veterinarians. The owners of a collection should be informed of these fees up front so they are prepared to pay for a veterinarian's services. There are many different fee structures and methods of billing, but the author's practice reflects that of a traditional ambulatory food animal practice. This includes a travel charge that is billed per mile 1 way and an hourly rate billed in 15-minute increments, with a 1-hour minimum. This fee covers all services that are performed on site, including examinations, sample collection, professional services (such as hoof trims and wound care), surgery, and necropsy. The client is billed an additional amount for drugs and supplies that are used from the veterinarian's inventory, an equipment use fee for certain specialized equipment that the veterinarian owns, and the cost of any diagnostic testing that is performed off site. Fees should reflect the veterinarian's experience and expertise and be adequate to cover the cost of services and goods sold with a reasonable profit. Ideally, fees should be collected at the time services are rendered, but clients can be billed if they have a good relationship with the veterinarian or practice. Some ambulatory zoo practitioners charge a flat monthly rate that covers certain tasks and visits or are paid on a retainer basis to be available as needed.

### **NECESSARY EQUIPMENT AND SUPPLIES**

Ambulatory zoo practice mimics ambulatory farm call practice in many ways, and a mobile zoo practitioner can be outfitted similarly. If an individual veterinarian is responsible for providing services for several smaller collections, then having an appropriate vehicle that is properly stocked with needed materials is often necessary. If a veterinarian is only servicing 1 or 2 collections, however, particularly if they are larger collections, then the veterinarian may consider working with the collection owner or manager to have the necessary equipment available on site. The veterinarian may also want to visit the collection for a consult prior to performing any veterinary services to determine which supplies and equipment are available or needed and to make sure that work areas are conducive to the work that needs to be performed.

- **Vehicle:** a veterinarian whose practice is primarily ambulatory may want to invest in a vehicle that is suited for this type of practice. There are specific trucks, truck inserts, vans, and recreational vehicle (RV)-type vehicles that are

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