



RHINO AND THEIR KEEPERS

With its formidable presence, the rhino never fails to awe and fascinate Zoo visitors. Imagine what it would be like to give one of these massive creatures a back scratch, a foot trim, or a mineral oil massage! Richard Floyd, Lydia Frazier and Marilyn Fackler-Gray can, for these are some of the tasks they perform as the Zoo's rhino keepers.

A lifelong love of animals inspired Lead Keeper Richard Floyd to join the Zoo in 1966. Since then, he has served as a keeper in the Zoo's North America and Aquatics sections, as well as worked in the commissary. In 1981, he became the keeper for the Zoo's black rhinos.

This African rhino is notorious for its unpredictable behavior. "Black rhinos will charge anything," explains Richard. "You just can't get near them." In spite of this species' fearsome reputation,

Richard has forged, over the years, a close relationship with his six charges: 31-year-old Twinkletoes, here since 1966; 15-year-old Mabel and 16-year-old Gus, wild-caught from Zimbabwe in 1982; Mabel's nine-year-old daughter Shabani; Buster, a 13-year-old male acquired from the Memphis Zoological Park in 1979; and Sweetpea, a 15-year-old female who arrived in 1979 as part of a breeding exchange with the Cincinnati Zoo.

This clan reflects a vast array of personalities.

by Mari Fukuyama



(PREVIOUS PAGE) Keeper Lydia Frazier enjoys a companionable moment with Randa, the feistiest member of the Zoo's Indian rhino clan.

(TOP) The tallest of the Zoo's Indian rhinos, Terai has a longer, narrower face than either Herman or Randa.

(MIDDLE) A male in his late 20s, Herman can be identified by the mole on his upper lip and the massive folds around his neck and shoulders.

(BOTTOM) Unlike her two companions who sport curved horns, 23-year-old Randa can be distinguished by the flat surface at the front of her horn.

"Buster is wonderful," says Richard, "very pleasant and even-tempered." A young breeding male, Buster has sired two offspring, one with Sweetpea and the other with Twinkletoes, since his arrival.

True to her name, Sweetpea displays a gentle demeanor. "Sweetpea," says Richard, "is good-natured and easygoing. She's very mellow, like Buster." Twinkletoes, or "Twink," as Richard calls her, is less agreeable. "She's always been standoffish," explains Richard. A prolific breeder, Twink has produced six calves here at the Zoo.

Now the picture of calm, Mabel was a veritable ball of fire when she first came to the Zoo, threatening to break through her crate. Fortunately, after becoming a mother, this feisty female settled down. Gus, in contrast, was low-key from day one. "With Mabel so aggressive, I thought Gus would be ten times worse," laughs Richard, recalling the pair's arrival. "But when I looked in the crate, he was fast asleep!" Shabani, unfortunately, is not so serene. "I have to watch Shabani constantly — she's so nervous and easily spooked," says Richard.

Richard has also had the privilege of being the Zoo's Sumatran rhino keeper. Of the three Sumatran rhinos he has cared for, Richard claims that Embam, who arrived in 1991, is the most genial. "Even on her first day here, Em was sweet and calm," says Richard. "She's very active and alert." Because of the Sumatran's gentle nature, Richard can enter Em's exhibit to hand feed her some of her favorite tidbits — kaffir plum and ficus leaves. Fond as she is of tossing around her boomer ball or splashing in her pool, Em will not hesitate to trot to the front of her exhibit whenever Richard passes by. In spite of his affection for this fuzzy youngster, Richard is equally devoted to all his charges. "These animals are our friends," he says. "Taking care of them is a privilege. You feel like you're doing something worthwhile and meaningful with your life."

On Richard's days off, Keeper Marilyn Fackler-Gray cares for the black and Sumatran rhinos. The other three days, she is a "demand" keeper, working wherever she is needed. Marilyn initially joined the Zoo as a part-time keeper in 1982. Prior to that, she held a number of diverse occupations. "I've been everything," laughs Marilyn, "a shoeshine girl, a secretary." In 1985, Marilyn became a keeper full time.

Marilyn has served on a variety of strings, including the elephant barn, where she worked for many years before transferring to rhinos in October, 1991. Thanks to her prior experience, Marilyn has developed a wealth of knowledge and a healthy respect for working with large, potentially dangerous animals, which she brings to her present assignment: "It's deceiving when you see rhinos at a distance — from the front of the exhibit, for example," explains Marilyn. "You don't appreciate how big and powerful they really are — or how fast they can move."

Although she clearly enjoys and cares about animals, Marilyn also appreciates other facets of keeper life: "I like the physicality of the job, being outdoors. It's great to get paid for something you like to do!" When asked if that includes such keeper duties as lifting heavy bales of hay, hosing yards or toting several hundred pounds of manure in a wheelbarrow, Marilyn laughs, "Being a keeper is like being a firefighter or a stuntperson — it's a calling."

Keepers Lydia Frazier and Stu Millar are responsible for the Zoo's three Indian rhinos. Stu, Lydia's relief keeper, is fairly new to the rhino string, having only transferred over from the Zoo's nursery in February. Lydia, however, has worked with Indian rhinos since early 1990. A graduate of U.C. Berkeley in psychology and anthropology, Lydia first came to the Zoo as a research assistant. After taking a keeper class, however, Lydia eventually cut back her research hours to become a full-time keeper — a transition she made in 1985.

The Zoo's Indian rhinos consist of Herman, who arrived in 1966, Randa, a female acquired from the Gladys Porter Zoo in 1974, and Terai, a 12-year-old female who came in 1990 from the Oklahoma City Zoo as part of a breeding exchange.

Because of the strong rapport she has established with these three over the years, Lydia routinely enters their enclosures to trim their feet or give them mineral oil rubs. On one occasion, Lydia removed part of an infected horn from one of her rhinos — a grueling, weeklong task that involved cutting back the horn with a fine-toothed saw. Remarkably, this task was accomplished without the animal being restrained or tranquilized.



Although the Indian rhino tends to be docile in captivity, Lydia is aware at all times of the potential risks inherent in performing hands-on care. "There's always an emphasis on caution and safety," she says. "Whenever I go in with them, I make sure I have a clear escape route within a few feet. Generally, I only go in when the animals are lying down or relaxed."

Lydia's charges are a diverse trio. Calm, amiable Herman is the group's breeding male. Comfortable with visitors, he often serves as Lydia's "partner" in her keeper close-up talks. "Since Herman's a little hard of hearing, it's difficult to get his attention," says Lydia, "but with the help of twenty people shouting his name, he'll come right over and hang around waiting for treats." Oddly enough, adds Lydia with a smile, Herman displays an uncanny ability to hear the rustle of browse, no matter where he is!

Although newest to the clan, Terai takes the honor of being the most eager to please. "Terai is a sweetheart," says Lydia. "When I'm ready to clean her yard, she's already in her stall waiting for me to close the door. When I want to check her feet, she'll lift them one at a time, so I can look at them."

Old-timer Randa is not so agreeable. "Randa's a feisty personality," says Lydia. "She can get cranky. Sometimes, when I want her to go in her stall, Randa will just ignore me and stay lying in the sun." Although dealing with Randa can be a battle of wills, Lydia confesses that the older female is her favorite. "I love them all, but with Randa I've always felt more comfortable, in spite of her crankiness."

"I feel lucky to have the opportunity to get close to these magnificent animals," she adds. "There's a sense of communion with them that's very rewarding to me."

Richard Floyd, Marilyn Fackler-Gray, Lydia Frazier, Stu Millar and their fellow keepers play a vital role in the Zoo's mission of conservation, for it is this group's hard work, expertise and commitment that enable the Zoo to support and preserve the lives of such endangered species as the rhinoceros. □



(TOP) Em, the Zoo's female Sumatran rhino, savors a leafy treat from Lead Keeper Richard Floyd.

(BOTTOM) Since her arrival in 1966, Twinkletoes has produced six calves at the Zoo.