

Zoo trainer shares behind-the-scenes secrets

BY KIMBERLY FORNEK
kfornek@pioneerlocal.com

Anything can be an enrichment tool for a animal, students in the Hinsdale Humane Society Summer Camp learned Friday.

Lou Tomes, an instructor and resource coordinator at Brookfield Zoo, said pumpkins are ideal for tigers.

"They use pumpkins as soccer balls," Tomes said. "These tigers love to swim and a pumpkins floats, so it works on the land and in the water."

Orangutans are given telephone directories to amuse themselves.

"The phone books themselves have very interesting smells," Tomes said.

Zookeepers spray the pages with scents that intrigue the animals.

Objects sometimes enable the animal to engage in his natural behavior.

"In the wild, an orangutan builds a new nest every night," Tomes said. "Tearing apart phone books is part of the nesting behavior," Tomes said.

She showed the children a hard plastic giant pickle that was nearly flattened by a polar bear, using the same technique it would to smash into a seal cave for a meal.

The polar bear "rears up on his hind feet and comes down full force on the seal cave," Tomes said.

The animals are trained to make movements and stances in response to verbal or visual cues from the zookeepers.

"We train our animals to participate in their own health care."

Tomes showed photos of a

silver otter reaching for a yellow target that was placed high on his cage, so the zookeeper has an opportunity to examine the animal's belly and pads on his paws for any sores or injuries.

Why would we train an animal to stretch open his mouth? Tomes asked the campers.

"To see if he has any teeth or gum problems," Grace Brady, 11, of Hinsdale said.

From movies, their own reading and the earlier camp visits that week, the 11 girls in the Adventures in Animal Awareness Camp were quite knowledgeable about animals and their habits.

"The best place to do a blood draw from a dolphin is from the tail fluke," Tomes said.

"We learned that at the Shedd Aquarium," Eilise McCormack, 9, of La Grange said. "You can see the veins on the tail if you are close enough or is you are the trainer."

Tomes explained how the animals are gradually, but repeatedly exposed to being touched a certain way, or to a carrier in which they have to be transported.

Brady said her own pet cat would get in the carrier willingly, but then constantly meow.

"I had to keep dropping treats in" to get her to quiet down, Brady said.

Both Brady and 10-year-old Natalie Newmann knew a deerlike animal with black and white bands on its legs and striped hindquarters is an okapi from central Africa.

Despite their stripes, they are not related to a zebra. Brady correctly answered that okapis are related to giraffes.



Using long sticks as tools, Natalie Newmann of Hinsdale tries out a puzzle box built for orangutans that the zoo fills with treats. The Hinsdale Humane Society's Summer Camp visited Brookfield Zoo Friday to find out how animals are "trained" to help zookeepers monitor their health and well-being.

Brookfield Zoo Educator Lou Tomes holds a sturdy plastic stool that tigers managed to puncture several times with their sharp teeth and claws as part of a demonstration on introducing unusual objects to an animal. | PHOTOS BY JON LANGHAM-FOR SUN-TIMES MEDIA