When your first word is “cat,” it may be an indication that your life’s mission will involve working with animals. That’s certainly the case for Dr. Mary Thurber, a second-year resident with the UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine’s Zoological Medicine Service. The three-year residency program begins with a one-year rotation through the school’s Veterinary Medical Teaching Hospital and the Sacramento Zoo. Now Thurber is spending her second year at the San Diego Zoo, and she’s continuing to add to her impressive lifelong list of accomplishments.

“A lot of my excitement about wildlife comes from my family and our vacations that always centered on seeing animals,” said Thurber, recalling her experiences as a child. “That became a big focus of my education and my career – to help preserve wildlife and ensure that my kids and their kids can have those same wonderful experiences I had as a child.”

As an 8-year-old living in Australia for a year, she insisted to her parents that they see wildlife in its natural environment, not just in a zoo. So vacations on Australia’s east coast involved seeking out platypuses, koalas, wombats, and other species in nature.

As an undergrad at Stanford University, Thurber researched wild elephants and did her honors thesis on elephant parasites. This enabled her to travel to Namibia to study them in their natural habitat. She also routinely shadowed an equine veterinarian who practiced close to campus. Having grown up in Madison, Wisconsin, she was able to work with a researcher at the University of Wisconsin (UW) Comparative Orthopaedic Research Laboratory in the summers, leading to her choice of UW for veterinary school.

Thurber had an active four years of veterinary school: externships at Chicago’s Brookfield Zoo, the North Carolina Zoo, the San Diego Zoo Safari Park, and the Wildlife Health Center at UC Davis; participating in a published study on ecohealth and primate parasites in Uganda; and flamingo research that was published in the Journal of Zoo and Wildlife Medicine.

In her current position as a UC Davis resident at the San Diego Zoo, Thurber cares for more than 3,700 animals, which consist of more than 650 species and subspecies. The team of veterinarians has an active case list of approximately 200 animals that are being medically cared for at any given time. These duties include annual health examinations, managing daily hospitalizations, quarantine examinations, re-check appointments to maintain proper follow-up care, emergencies, and pre-shipment examinations of animals being sent to other institutions.

Thurber’s current list of patients is a great example of the diversity of animals that zoo veterinarians care for every day: a female fishing cat the zoo is hoping to breed that is receiving a reproductive examination; a bonobo with respiratory illness; a chestnut-breasted malkoha that is losing weight; a basilisk lizard with a traumatic tail injury; and an infant Soemmerring’s gazelle with failure of passive transfer (didn’t nurse from its dam to receive adequate antibodies).

This year at the San Diego Zoo, and next year’s residency rotation at the San Diego Zoo Safari Park and SeaWorld San Diego, align perfectly with Thurber’s career goals of working in zoos with a strong focus and commitment to conservation. She hopes that her educational and residency experiences will allow her to practice clinical medicine while doing conservation research projects both nationally and internationally.

UC DAVIS RESIDENT SPENDS YEAR AT SAN DIEGO ZOO

Dr. Mary Thurber at the San Diego Zoo with a newborn gerenuk, a long-necked antelope also known as the giraffe gazelle. Photo credit: San Diego Zoo Global

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