Animals get extras to cope with cold

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Keepers of animals have an extra job to do when it gets cold outside.

The people who work at the zoo, animal shelter and the LSU agricultural center are taking special precautions to make sure their animals stay warm during this week's freezing temperatures.

At the Greater Baton Rouge Zoo, at least 12 zookeepers began Wednesday afternoon getting about 550 animals ready for cold weather, said George Felton, director of the zoo.

"We heat every animal that can't withstand this kind of weather," Felton said. "For these animals, we lock them into heated houses and put down more bedding hay."

All of the animals receive food with higher calorie content in cold weather, Felton said.

"The only problem we've had recently is when the power went out when the temperature was 11 degrees," Felton said. "I just had to simply pray — but the power came on before it got too serious."

"I think we'll be looking into buying a big generator as a backup system, and with the way this weather has been, we'll need one," he said.

The major difference in caring for the animals in colder weather is that the animals are not allowed to come and go as they please in their cages and houses, Felton said.

The amount of time animals have to spend inside can cause problems. A baby monkey died during last week's cold spell, and while Felton said autopsy results were incomplete, he said it probably was caused by two female monkeys fighting over the baby while they were in close quarters.

The zoo has had problems with water pressure, but the only drawback is that it takes longer to clean the cages and do daily tasks, Felton said.

Several animals do not require extra care during the colder weather, Felton said.

"Some of these animals, like polar bears and even white-tailed deer, if in their natural habitat, would be used to this weather," Felton said.

Pet owners should take special precautions to make sure their pets are warm enough in cold weather. Robert Lee, director of the Animal Control Center, advised pet owners to take the following precautions:

- Take pets indoors if possible, but if the pet stays outside, consider running an extension cord to the doghouse or shed and leave a light bulb burning inside.
- Check the water in the pet's dish to see that it has not frozen. Pets can dehydrate in cold weather as well as in warm weather.
- Provide extra food for the pet, as he will burn up more calories trying to keep warm.
- Don't leave pets chained outside. The chain restricts the pet's movement and, if the ground freezes, it can get uncomfortable, especially if mud freezes on the pet.
- Move birds from windows and drafty areas inside the house.
- Check on the pet often, especially if he is left outside.