Feeding time at the Baton Rouge Zoo is something to roar about

I'm enough to make a lion roar— or a monkey grin. Zoo food, that is. The platters of apples, oranges and bananas and bowls of meaty canine food put out for animals and birds at the Greater Baton Rouge Zoo looks good enough to eat. In fact, although much of it could be eaten by humans, it's strictly for the animals. All the food for the birds, mammals, reptiles and amphibians comes from the zoo's kitchen. Florence Ann Felton, commodities buyer, buys all the food suppliers and supervises a staff of two kitchen "chiefs."

The animals are given a diet that approximates food in their natural habitat. "We study what animals eat in the wild and what they will eat in captivity. Then we try to give them a balance," Felton said.

"It's not any trouble getting fresh produce," Felton said. "We get it twice a week from Capitol City Produce, and we get our grains once a week from Purina. The hay also comes from a local dealer." Felton orders frozen canine and feline food, as well as a bird-of-prey diet from Animal Spectrum in Nebraska. The meats come with all the nutrients (including vitamin supplements) that the animals need.

"We feed meal worms to a lot of the birds. Occasionally some of the primates eat meal worms," Felton said. "We also give our birds and chicks to the birds of prey. Actually, all of this food could be cooked and eaten by humans." Felton said. "It's all FDA approved, all of it except the bird-of-prey food."

It's not unusual for visitors or zoo keepers to comment that the animal dishes "look good enough to eat."

"I tell them that the flamingo food looks like jambalaya," Felton said. "Sometimes I tell the keepers that all that fruit chipped up for the birds looks like a fruit salad."

The zoo kitchen is utilitarian, clean and functional, with stainless steel tables and equipment. A blackboard along one wall has daily reminders for the "chiefs" and the keepers.

Irra Johnson, who has worked in the zoo kitchen 18 years, said the most difficult recipe to prepare is the flamingo diet. "It takes the longest time to put together," she said.

Johnson said the zoo staff strictly follows the prepared recipes. "Sometimes the keepers request something extra to see if the animals would like it," she said. Carefully planned and prepared nutritious diets are all important in keeping zoo animals healthy. Junk food is not allowed.

"The reason we ask visitors to the zoo not to feed animals junk food (potato chips, popcorn, etc) is that the animals like it," Felton said. "They're just like kids. They'll eat the junk food, and then they won't eat what's good for them."

Through the years, the zoo kitchen has worked out diets other animals eat and what they like. Felton said, "Sometimes I tell the keepers that all that fruit chipped up for the birds looks like a fruit salad."

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that the animals accept and that will keep them healthy. While the recipes remain consistent, they are changed from time to time to give the animals variety and to keep the meals from becoming boring.

"You can, for example, feed the primates nothing but monkey chow (a dry primate food). It's 100 percent nutritious," Felton said. "But we change the diet around and add something different to make it interesting."

Felton said that from time to time, animals will simply get off their feed.

When dealing with hoof stock, she simply changes the mixture of grain that goes into their diet. "We give them an exotic hoof stock diet made by Purina," she said. "I like to mix it with sweet feed and corn. They eat it better that way."

She also plans some seasonal food changes. "The palm cockatoos eat pomegranates," she said. "I watch for them in the stores when they come into season."

Felton said zoo keepers often go out on the zoo grounds and chop down trees and bushes to give to the animals, Felton said. "The keepers also start a zoo garden so they can give snacks, like tomatoes, to the primates."

Zoo keepers pick up prepared meals at the kitchen and feed their assigned animals in a carefully planned daily routine. They also keep close watch on how the animals are eating.

"If the animals are not eating certain things we're giving them, the keepers have to report back to me. Then, I see if I have to change the diet. I may put something else in the food and change the diet," Felton said.

Watching a group of black and white ruffed lemurs devour a bowl of fruits and vegetables, keeper-Jeb Barsh said, "They really like bananas," he said. "They have to go through a lot of lettuce to get one banana. They'll pick out the bananas first. Then they go for the apples."

Pointing out a baby lemur, Barsh said, "The little baby is a real pig. He gets right in the bowl to eat."

Donna Chance, a primate keeper, is currently helping to care for a baby Diana monkey. "He's about six weeks old," said Chance, "and we call him Hoppy. He gets 1 to 2 ounces of primate at each feeding, and he gets bananas between feedings."

Like all zoo keepers, Chance has learned the "favorite" foods of her animals. "The Colobus monkeys like onions and Irish potatoes. They also like lots of leaves, including willow and red maple."

Brian Norton, a third-year veterinary medicine student at LSU, works part-time at the zoo. Watching the Colobus monkeys sort through their daily "spread," he said, "Some days, they'll hardly eat anything. Other days they only want the greens."

Referring to Felton he said, "She takes what the animals do eat (in the wild) and what they need and puts it together. "There's so much out here to learn for anyone who wants to learn."

Feeding roughly 1,000 animals and birds a day is somewhat like feeding an army. Felton was recruited by her husband George, director of the Greater Baton Rouge Zoo, when the facility opened in 1970. She developed her animal "recipes" by consulting with other zoos and with on-the-job training. Today, the kitchen staff points to the many healthy, and seemingly contented zoo inhabitants, as proof of their good cooking.

While zoo recipes may not stir up excitement at home, they are fun to read. Here is a sampling from the zoo kitchen...