

A Day at the Circus



It's 7.30 in the morning at the Great British Circus, the only touring circus in the UK to follow a 200-year tradition of including exotic so-called 'wild' animals in performances.

Caring for animals is a demanding job, calling for a major commitment. Last night, the stables and animal-care staff didn't finish feeding, watering and bedding down until 10.30pm. But everyone here is ready for an early start and another day of making sure they can deal with all the physical and psychological needs of the lions, tigers, camels, horses and ponies, the reindeer - and even the kangaroo!

So, first thing, even before breakfast, out to graze goes all the hoofed stock - but not until each one has a breakfast drink. The big cats' night-shutters are opened up and the animals watered. The felines' travel compartments - also their on-site 'bedrooms' - are cleaned out and freshened with new sawdust, and strawed-up if it's chilly. The stables and stalls are mucked out.

Once that's done, the cats are put through their paces in an exercise-and-training session in the circus ring. Like all animals brought into the arena, they may refresh old skills or move gently forward in learning new ones.

How do you show a lion or tiger what you'd like it to do? You skewer a juicy bit of meat on a pointed stick, and lead the animal by tempting it forward following the meat. The stick, by then without meat, eventually becomes a pointer or 'cue' for the animal as part of a performance. But this is training - no point in trying to rush or be rough - the animal would be confused!

When the objective is reached - a move, a sit, a roll - the cat gets the meat, and the trainer can feel he's made a little progress in a long, slow process of teaching.

Of course, with other types of animal you give appropriate rewards and encouragement. Most grazing animals like carrots! But it still takes time, lots of time, even though horses or camels can be led to walk through their moves.

Cat practice over, the lions and tigers are sent 'home', with their bedroom doors now open to let them 'free-associate' in their exercise runs. Lions and tigers need to sleep about 18 hours in 24, so many choose to lounge around 'indoors', feline couch potatoes; but every animal has its playtime, and staff must be always on hand to watch over them and help them get the best out of their exercise.



→ By now, it's 9.30 - two hours' animal care has worked up an appetite so the animal people, including the Directors of the Circus, get their breakfast at last.

Half an hour later, it's back into the Ring for two hours practice and training with the horses and hoofed animals. Once again, the trainers and grooms know you have to make haste slowly - patience and carrots are the key to success.

And then, a rest. For the animals! The stable-hands have led all animals back to their grazing after practice, so all are re-checked around midday, and then the staff have the luxury of three hours to eat, shop, and do their personal chores. Animals are still out grazing, a session of 'R & R' before the excitement of evening-time at the circus.

Also till 3pm, the bosses and admin staff are kept busy with office jobs, maintenance schedules, their own domestic needs - spare time isn't a common concept for the circus people. And this three-hour spell while no animals are in the circus ring is a chance for the human performers to exercise and practice their part in the show.

For the staff, the break is all too brief. At 3pm all animals must be led back to the stables for a wash and brush-up in time for the 5pm show. Once cleaned and harnessed, they're ready to move to the arena a few minutes before their part in the performance.

The show opens with the lions and tigers, so the Ring staff have plenty of exercise setting up the performance cage and placing props. Then, it's part of their task to see audience members to their seats for the performance. Everyone has at least two jobs here - of necessity, as traditional circus is unsubsidised and must pay its own way.

The first show's over - get ready for the second one! There's 45 minutes between the two 'houses', time to pick up litter and see the second audience of the day to their chosen seats.

9.30pm. Performances are done for today. But work isn't! After the final show, the ring-cage goes up ready for next morning's big-cat practice. And the animal-care staff are still hard at it, feeding and watering and bedding down all the stock. Once the big cats are in the privacy and security of their 'home space', they too are fed and watered at the end of their day, giving plenty of overnight 'digestion time' for their food.

For management and staff, evening meal-time finally comes at about 10.30pm - if they're well-organised, the food has cooked through the evening performance, so it's nicely ready.

A few minutes TV, perhaps, after supper. But not too much! There's no electricity after 11.30 when the circus' generator is stopped - but then, sleep's probably more important so we can cope with tomorrow, another long-but-rewarding day of training and animal care.

Chris Bartrop, - Route, Site and licensing co-ordinator for the Great British Circus



Actual shots from the DVD 'A Day At The Circus', available from the Circus Shop.