

Zoo and Exotic Animal Veterinarian – Jackie Gai, DVM

Dr. Jackie Gai of Vacaville is the owner and sole proprietor of a mobile zoo and exotic animal practice.

She offers home, ranch, and aviary calls throughout Northern California for camels, emu, reptiles, and just about any type of exotic or wild animal. She is also the attending veterinarian for the Performing Animal Welfare Society (PAWS), a sanctuary for wild animals that have been rescued or retired from zoos, circuses, and other captive situations.

“My practice is unique because of its variety, and also because I provide my services where the animals live – I basically bring the hospital to them,” she says.

Dr. Gai was born and raised in Honolulu and has lived in Northern California since 1975. Her heart’s desire was to be a veterinarian but she never thought she would make it because math and science weren’t her strong points. After high school, she worked as a trainee for a Bay Area police department. However, she also took a few prerequisite science courses at night at Oakland’s Merritt College and was lucky enough to have excellent, inspirational teachers. Once she realized that she was capable of meeting the academic challenges, she committed to veterinary medicine and has never looked back.

Dr. Gai began working with captive wildlife as a volunteer at the Oakland Zoo in 1989. She was hired as a zookeeper and took care of all kinds of animals, including helping to hand-raise a baby African elephant. She learned everything she could about wild animals, valuable experience for her when she entered veterinary school at UC Davis. After graduating in 2001, she worked at PAWS, the Oakland Zoo, and Micke Grove Zoo.

“One of my favorite patients is Spanky, an older male tiger at PAWS (see photo). He was rescued in 2004 in a group of 39 tigers from a situation of severe neglect in Colton, California. I organized the safe transport of the tigers, five or six at a time, to their new home at the PAWS sanctuary. Spanky was diagnosed with a squamous cell carcinoma in one of his front paws, and recently underwent surgery at UC Davis to amputate the affected toe. I accompanied him to the VMTH, observed his surgery,

and escorted him back home to PAWS where he is now recovering.

“One of the most enjoyable aspects of veterinary medicine for me is problem solving, and I really love internal medicine, which can be especially challenging and rewarding in exotic species. It is not always possible to use the same diagnostic and treatment modalities with exotics as we can with our domestic patients, yet many of the diseases we see in domestic animals also occur in



Dr. Jackie Gai attends to Spanky, a tiger at PAWS, at the UC Davis VMTH

wild animals such as renal failure, cancer, allergies, and diabetes. I also love the constant learning that is required in this type of work. My long-term goal as a veterinarian is to never stop learning.”