

# Uncommon Care

*Rose Borkowski,  
exotic-animal veterinarian,  
makes a world of difference*

BY LAURA FERGUSON

THERE ARE THOSE DAYS VETERINARIAN Rose Borkowski calls routine: a vaccination for a pet ferret, a cardiac workup on a gibbon from a local zoo.

But then there are days when the answers are less clear, more troublesome. Take a nearly fatal sinus infection in a two-year-old penguin that required anesthesia and numerous surgeries over three years, risky procedures on animals for whom medical information is quite limited.

"We sweat bullets over a case like that," says Borkowski. "But we were able to stay on top of it and help him pull through. We had to develop safe tranquilization and surgical protocols for him. We now have those and X rays and CAT scans of his head, which are useful for treating other penguins. We all learned a tremendous amount and are elated that he is better."

Then there are the hefty clients. Borkowski, at five feet, four inches, might seem to be at a disadvantage when treating, say, a 100-pound emu, a bird that can lacerate with a good kick of its toes. But Borkowski responds with a characteristic blend of common sense and reverence.

"I like this job because it is physically challenging work and you have to concentrate on what you're doing."

Besides, she adds, trained adult male seal lions, each weighing 600 to 700 pounds, are among the easiest and most delightful to work with. "Because they have such a tremendous trusting relationship with their trainers, you can get right next to them. They are such inquisitive animals and they pay attention so intently that they are enchanting. There are moments when I am awed."

Such is the uncommon care that Borkowski brings to her job as head of the exotic animal service at the School of Veterinary Medicine's Henry and Lois Foster Hospital for Small Animals and as consultant to the New England Aquarium. At the Foster Hospital, her patients range from smaller exotic pets such as rabbits and ferrets to the



Rose Borkowski listens to the heartbeat of Jaheel, a black-footed penguin, at the New England Aquarium, as Claudia Meschler, V99, looks on.

primates and kangaroos of local zoos. On her twice-monthly visits to the Boston aquarium, she may help treat animals as varied as stranded harbor seals with pneumonia, sharks with buoyancy problems, anacondas with the hint of a blister, a penguin with a cold. "Sometimes the pace and running between so many different species is hectic and challenging," she says, "but I can't imagine doing anything else. These species really need veterinary attention."

## Pursuing a Profession

Growing numbers of veterinarians share Borkowski's commitment to caring for exotic and wild animals; the Tufts School of Veterinary Medicine itself encourages that trend through its Wildlife Clinic. But Borkowski has had to work hard to learn her specialized skills.

Growing up in Miami, Borkowski "always wanted to know how to fix a bird's broken wing." Aside from the usual cats and dogs, household pets included a parakeet, injured ducks and an octopus. Years later, with an undergraduate degree from the University of

North Carolina, she was back in Florida training dolphins at a marine park, working for an aquatic bird rehabilitation program, and helping endangered manatees, when her ambitions crystallized.

"There were not many veterinarians involved with these species, and yet I saw such a real need for veterinarians to work with them," says Borkowski, "not just from the standpoint of population management, but to really be involved in clinical one-on-one medicine."

But as a student at the University of Florida veterinary school, she was surprised to find few courses and clinical experiences that involved birds, reptiles and aquatic animals that went beyond treating cats, dogs, horses and cows. The school had zoo and wildlife services, but with courses rotating every two weeks, "you really couldn't obtain strong skills or work with a breadth of species."

Borkowski made good use of every vacation break to develop those skills, including participating in the summer aqua veterinarian program at Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution in Massachusetts. She also interned at Angell Memorial Hospital in Boston. "Domestic animals can be important regardless of what animal you expect to treat, because you have to have basic medical systems down. Cardiac disease is cardiac disease."

After veterinary school, she continued her education as an associate with a small animal practice in Boca Raton. The relevance was, again, a deeper appreciation of exotic-animal care. "I needed the experience in a regular veterinary practice and I knew that it was important to understand why small animal veterinarians may not be able to see exotic animals. One time-consuming problem was how to safely restrain the patient. "Restraint," she says, "is an art in itself."

Then Hurricane Andrew struck, and Borkowski found herself working in a shelter set up in a blown-out shopping center. The storm traumatized vast numbers of animals and it marked a turning point in her

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARK MORELLI

career. "Crisis work with animals involves the entire breadth of species," says Borkowski. "I knew I wanted to be someone who could be immersed in exotic and wildlife care. I wanted to have it down to the point where it was a reflex."

#### **An Observer of the Animal Kingdom**

Borkowski found that immersion in a one-year internship at Tufts School of Veterinary Medicine's Wildlife Clinic. She was also able to work closely with Howard N. Krum, staff veterinarian at the New England Aquarium. Their teamwork led to an agreement between the Aquarium and Tufts two years ago. (Working with Krum now is staff veterinarian Beth Chittick, a 1995 graduate of the veterinary school.) Borkowski's internship also developed into a full-time job as staff veterinarian in Tufts' Foster Hospital for Small Animals, in charge of the exotic pet service.

"Dr. Borkowski has worked hard to

improve the delivery of care to exotic pets brought to our hospital," says Dr. Linda Ross, associate dean for clinical programs and hospital director. "While all veterinarians must learn the anatomy, physiology and diseases for several animal species, the number with which she must be familiar is three to four times that of other clinicians!"

One recent afternoon, Borkowski stopped by the aquarium as Chittick and staff examined a six-foot anaconda named Sylvia. Recently introduced into her exhibit area, Sylvia had developed a swollen scale, perhaps as a result of the change in humidity. Chittick took a biopsy of the tiny area. "It's not a cosmetic problem," stressed Borkowski. "An infection can kill a snake if it gets into the blood. If the test comes back positive for bacterial disease, we can medicate her feed or administer injections."

Borkowski next checked the progress of Jaheel, a black-footed penguin she first treated for a little cough. When Jaheel took

a turn for the worse, veterinarians administered fluids and antibiotics and set up a nearly around-the-clock watch. "She was very closely monitored," says Borkowski, who now has a soft spot for the baby penguin. "Jaheel is really sweet," she says. "When you pet her little chin, she lifts it up as though she were pointing to the North Star."

Clearly, being a close observer of the animal kingdom has its rewards. "I am always amazed by individuality within a species," says Borkowski, who enjoys the at-home company of two adopted greyhounds. "I see it with birds and reptiles and fish. They all have unique physical manifestations, temperaments, expressiveness and playfulness. As a culture we don't get much individual interaction with these animals, we've forgotten about their sweeping diversity and the nuances of their behavioral repertoire. Even within species there is such tremendous diversity. I see it all the time."