Grace Dickinson is the founder of Reptiles etc, a company that trains animals for film and television work. As the company name suggests, her work doesn’t just focus on the more familiar species of four-legged thespians like dogs or horses, but a wide range of other taxa, including invertebrates. She told John Bonner about her job and how the methods that she uses could make life easier for veterinary staff.

Grace Dickinson

FILM STAGES AREN’T THE ONLY PLACES THAT YOUR ANIMALS PERFORM – YOU ALSO WORK IN SCHOOLS GIVING CHILDREN HANDS-ON EXPERIENCE OF EXOTIC ANIMALS, AND YOU HELP PEOPLE WITH PHOBIAS TO OVERCOME THEIR FEAR OF SNAKES, SPIDERS, ETC. SO HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR ROLE?

Over the years I’ve been “zoo keeper”, “education officer”, “interpretations officer”, “animal handler”, “animal wrangler”, “presenter”, “snake charmer”, “herpetologist”, “aquarist”, “lecturer” and “consultant”. But at heart, I’m a zoo keeper and always will be. After all, the job of a modern zoo keeper encompasses all these skills.

WHERE DID THIS INTEREST IN EXOTIC SPECIES BEGIN?

I was born in Cambridge and my family lived in Cottenham on the outskirts of the city. I spent my early years on a farm where I had lots of pets and numerous orphaned or injured wildlife that my mother taught me how to look after. She wouldn’t let us have any animals unless we first proved we could care for them properly – she made sure we had read books to know how to look after them, that we could afford the costs of keeping them and knew where to go for specialist veterinary advice.

AND HOW DID THAT DEVELOP INTO TRAINING ANIMALS?

I spent hours teaching our ferrets to come when called, to jump, walk to heel and to beg. I recall one young female ferret called Flossy that I acquired as a teenager when I was doing work experience at the Welsh Mountain Zoo. They had got her from the RSPCA but soon found she was unsuitable for working with the education team because she was considered too vicious. But she was just young and frightened, and she taught me a lot about putting in time with an animal to gain its trust. She also helped my Dad to lay new wiring when he was renovating the house. To save ripping up all the floorboards, we took up just a couple at each end of the room, I popped her down, called her from the other side, and she ran straight for me, with a piece of string tied to her collar that we then used to pull all the new electrical wires through after her!

WHERE DID YOU GO FOR YOUR PROFESSIONAL QUALIFICATIONS?

After leaving school, I took the BTEC national diploma in animal care at the College of West Anglia in Cambridge. Then I received a work experience placement at Heythrop Zoological Garden (HZGs), a private collection specializing in providing wild animals for TV, film, media and live events. Later I went on to do a degree in animal behaviour at the University of Liverpool and continued working at HZG in my holidays. I have worked at various places since then – including Honolulu Zoo in Hawaii and Shepreth Wildlife Park in Hertfordshire, where I was responsible for the falconry demonstrations. I also went to work at Reaseheath College in Nantwich as a keeper instructor where I achieved a teaching qualification.
WHEN DID YOU SET UP THE COMPANY?
I have been working full time with Reptiles etc since 2017 but I had been working on a freelance basis for many years. The company is really just me but I am supported by a dedicated team of friends, former colleagues and volunteers. I also have a very understanding partner who helps me with the day-to-day care of my own collection of reptiles, amphibians, invertebrates, birds and rodents.

CAN ANYBODY DO THIS SORT OF WORK?
In Britain any type of commercial activity involving wild animals should be covered by a performing animals licence, animal transport certification and insurance. I never work with anyone who isn’t a qualified animal professional or a dedicated trainee in the case of work experience placements. Regrettably, there are many amateur enthusiasts doing similar work who don’t have full licensing, whose animals have not been habituated or properly trained, and even the basic welfare needs of the animals are not catered for. There are reptiles on display at live events that are not provided with a heat pad, have no water available, are not monitored with thermometers and thermostats and have no hiding places provided for them. This is much more common than you would think.

WHAT CAN YOU TELL ME ABOUT YOUR TRAINING METHODS?
It is all about relationship building, knowing your animal’s motivations and needs, and using force-free methods alongside positive reinforcement. Your readers will be familiar with clicker training for dogs, that is a fantastic tool and a real gateway to achieving a lot of useful behaviours. But the real basis of my training is positive reinforcement. Trainers talk about a “bridge” – a signal that marks the moment when the animal achieves what the trainer is looking for. That may be a click, a whistle or just the word ‘good’ but a mechanical bridge works best because of the differences in volume, tone and timing. I also use a target, a stick or light beam to attract the animal to where I want it to go. Often with birds and animals their natural curiosity will cause them to approach this target, which you then mark with the click and reinforce with a tasty treat.

THIS APPROACH WORKS FOR ALL SPECIES?
Yes, but the timing varies between different groups. So for example, tortoises, monitor lizards and crocodilians are faster to investigate something new than bearded dragons or skinks. Body temperature and being accustomed to the presence of humans is also very important. Lizard species that rely on hunting by tracking the movement of prey may require the target stick to move or jiggle to attract their attention, whereas birds or mammals will often respond quickly to just seeing the target stick. But the principles work with most species. For example, I have worked with poison dart frogs, which you can put a small platform in the enclosure and flash a laser pointer on the platform every time before you drop food in. Before too long, just flashing the laser pointer on the platform will cause the frogs to hop on to it expecting to be fed.

WHAT IS THE MOST UNUSUAL SPECIES YOU HAVE WORKED WITH?
I once trained 10 Egyptian scarab beetles to run on a specially built race track for a scene in the BBC drama series Atlantis. The beetles had to run down the track in a particular sequence and repeat the performance over several takes while the actors cheered, placed bets and remembered to get their lines and positions right for the camera. The beetles did the exact right thing every take and I got a standing ovation for their performance when we cut!

ACTORS SAY YOU SHOULDN’T WORK WITH ANIMALS AND CHILDREN – WHICH ONES ARE PARTICULARLY DIFFICULT?
Hedgehogs can be challenging as they can be a bit short-tempered and of course they can curl into a ball whenever they’ve had enough which can make them quite difficult to work with! On the other hand, I once worked with a cobra who was very happy at work and very clever – if you guided her in the right direction across a set she would learn a route and repeat it for a film or photography set-up.

COULD THIS APPROACH HAVE APPLICATIONS IN VETERINARY PRACTICE?
Training animals to allow clinical procedures is really rewarding. My favourite example is that of a colleague who has trained some zebras to walk calmly alongside their trainers without a collar or restraint and also wait on a station and accept vaccination injections voluntarily – really impressive. The same techniques could easily be implemented with horses or other companion animals to take away fear or manhandling when the vet comes. I also really enjoyed working with Emma Hunt at Reaseheath College and the rabbits under her care in the small animal department. It’s an ongoing project and her rabbits now hop onto the weighing scales on vocal command alone. They will run into a carry box on cue, and we’re working on a paw present to allow voluntary nail clipping.

CAN ANYONE LEARN THESE METHODS?
Vets or VN’s with an interest in behaviour and training could certainly learn the basic principles of training in a very short space of time. They can then offer guidance and advice to pet owners to make both vet trips and administering basic treatments less stressful for their pets through a combination of habituation work and training techniques. It would be wonderful I’m sure for vets (as well as pets and their owners!) to be able to work with animals that are less stressed and more willing to be a part of their own health care.