KENT YAMAGUCHI
DIRECTOR OF THE SANTA ANA ZOO

Kent Yamaguchi, director of the Santa Ana Zoo for five years and the zoo’s education curator for 16 years before that, has an office in the master bedroom of a 1950s-era house that sits on the edge of the zoo’s 20 acres. And while he passes monkeys and tropical birds on his way to work each day, inside his office are constant reminders of the world right outside. Plastic monkeys hang from bulletin boards, his stapler is shaped like a fish and on one wall is an oversized wooden lid from a crate, hung like an enormous postcard, addressed to Yamaguchi with the contents listed as an adult male anteater. As a UC Irvine graduate, Yamaguchi also has an anteater mask’s filling a credenza in the corner.

1. GOT COJONES? Or rather, goat cojones float in a plastic jar on Yamaguchi’s desk. “My first week being zoo director, the zoo veterinarian walked in,” Yamaguchi says. The vet had just castrated a goat, and he brought his new boss a souvenir, saying, “If you need a pair, here they are.”

2. MARATHON MAN Yamaguchi began running four years ago, and now he’s hooked. “I probably run more than most,” he says. “I’ve done 30 half marathons and two marathons, usually one a month.” The racing bibs are all from California races. Some show his name as Kent, while others say he’s the Zoo Man.

3. IF YOU BUILD IT... These are samples of materials that could be used as the roof and siding for a new ocelot exhibit. “We’re having a meeting to talk about the exhibit,” he says. “It will be the zoo’s first ocelot exhibit, and we’re going to open in 2014.”

5. BEAUTIFUL BUGS A staff member gave this jeweled spider paperweight as a gift. “I use it to hold things down in my inbox. Because I was allergic to fur and feathers growing up, my pets were insects. So I love insects.” The framed butterflies were a gift from his wife for their 20th anniversary. “My favorite animal is the Urania moth from Madagascar. It’s like a rainbow that flies.” Inside the zoo, he says, his favorite animal is a golden lion tamarin, which is a little monkey with a mop of ginger fur.

6. TURTLE SHELL Yamaguchi is taking the skeleton and scutes, or scales, of a turtle and reassembling them, jigsaw-puzzle style. “People ask me what happens when animals die. Sometimes we give the bodies to different places — to the federal government for forensic labs, or museums. Sometimes we use the parts here to teach children about the animals.” But how do they get the skeleton? “We have a tub of flesh-eating beetles; they devour all the flesh off the skeleton.” It’s gross, he admits, and smelly.

7. JAR OF TEA “My wife and I do a lot of canning. We make jam, and we have a lot of Mason jars at home. It’s Lipton instant ice tea. I don’t drink coffee. Tea is my caffeine.”

8. SERIOUS BUSINESS The shelves behind Yamaguchi’s desk contain folder after folder of annual budgets and other paperwork for zoo business. “We are part of the city of Santa Ana,” he says. “I love to read the city of Santa Ana budget.” The zoo’s annual budget is $1.886 million, with about $750,000 coming from the city. The rest comes from ticket sales, snack stand and other fundraisers.

9. ZIPPING AROUND THE ZOO “I ride around the zoo at night,” Yamaguchi says. “I have to ride around and close everything and this helps me get around really fast. The zookeeper takes care of the animals’ physical and mental needs, keeps them happy and healthy. The zoo director is the guy who runs the place. I do the less glamorous stuff.” - AMY SENK