

## AVICULTURAL SOCIETY SPRING SOCIAL MEETING AT PAIGNTON ZOO

by Philip Schofield

Originating as the private collection, later opened to the public, of Herbert Whitley, Paignton Zoo has grown and changed over more than half a century since his death, but remains one of the UK's most impressive zoological collections. Some idea of its past, and the changes over the years, can be gleaned from a series of articles by Dr Emilius Hopkinson in the Magazine for 1931.

Some thirty members attended the meeting on 27 April, most of whom joined the afternoon tour of the collection, with Senior Bird Keeper Peter Smallbones.

I will attempt to describe some of the highlights of the collection, with apologies for omissions and any lapses in memory.

Before one even enters the zoo, a substantial colony of Chilean Flamingos can be seen, as the Zoo's 'shop window' to the outside world. Inside the Zoo, the first major walk-in enclosure is the Brookside Aviary. This well planted enclosure holds Black-necked Swans, Sacred Ibis, Madagascar Teal and Speckled Pigeons among other species. The height of the enclosure and the amount of vegetation make this aviary a bit like watching wild birds; sometimes one needs to sit still and see what appears. There has been a breeding population of Azure-winged Magpies in here for some years, but they were not in evidence on this occasion. The very natural-looking pond in this aviary is part of the same system as the main lake and the flamingo pond, all of which carry a lot of red suspended particles of red Devon earth. This can stain the white plumage of birds like the swans, but seems to have no other adverse effect.

At the end of this aviary is a window into the Asian Lions' enclosure. Lion taxonomy is debatable, but there is at least general agreement that Asian and African lions are distinct sub species. So Asian lions are distinguished from the African race by the fold of skin along the belly; the tail tuft is also said to be larger. This may be the race that occurred as far west as Iraq during the twentieth century. The Asian lions at Paignton have bred well over the years, and have produced a litter since our visit.

Leaving the Brookside aviary and heading uphill, the visitor enters a wooded area with Southern Cassowaries on the right and owl aviaries on the left. Cassowaries have bred well here over the years, but are currently reduced to three males. With their casqued heads, dagger-like inside claws and general air of menace, there is something of the popular concept of



a Velociraptor about them. Jo Gregson (Paignton's Curator of birds) has suggested something similar in this journal. Essentially forest birds, they look and do well in this setting. Opposite the Cassowaries are tall netted aviaries containing Eurasian Eagle Owls, Ural Owls and Great Grey Owls, again well suited to their surroundings.

Moving on past the pair of Sumatran Tigers, one comes to the Avian Breeding Centre, a complex of on and off-show aviaries with indoor holding areas, incubation and rearing rooms. Around the aviaries were free ranging Golden Pheasants which apparently maintain their numbers here, as do the far more numerous and long established Peafowl, although the Red Junglefowl that roamed the Zoo for many years have died out.

In the aviaries we saw last year's young Toco Toucan, now separated from its parents who were preparing to nest again, a young Hooded Pitta being hand-reared, Green-crested Touraco, breeding Southern Screamers [also the subject of an article by Jo Gregson) and some very vociferous Grey-winged Trumpeters. Hornbills here included Papuan Wreathed, Abyssinian Ground, and a second generation of captive bred Wrinkled.

Parrots were represented by Blue-throated, Red-fronted and Hyacinthine Macaws, Red Lories and Queen of Bavaria's (Golden) Conures. Waterfowl in the aviaries included Freckled Duck and the critically endangered) and often overlooked by waterfowl keepers) Baer's Pochard.

Excellent Lady Amherst's Pheasants were also here, with long high arched tails. Many of the Amhersts around today are said to be 'descended from wild-caught stock', a claim which is at least doubtful for some of them. These, however, are manifestly the genuine article. I was interested to hear that the Great Argus Pheasants here rear their own young, and that the male helps to feed the chicks as do the related Peacock Pheasants.

A species possibly on the way out of the collection, after many years of successful propagation, is the European Turtledove, represented by a lone male; I remember seeing good numbers of Turtles in Paignton's old Sub-tropical House (now demolished) back in the 1990s.

Returning to the 'Wetland' area of the Zoo, the main lake has always been a major feature, with Gibbons on the islands. There are now island groups of Black Howler Monkeys and Emperor Tamarins. Waterfowl include Comb Ducks, numerous free flying Greylag Geese, and smaller numbers of pinioned Bar-headed Geese, with a second pair of Black-necked Swans. Ducks include Ruddy and Common Shelduck, of which some of the latter are free-flying. Not always good 'stayers', they seem well settled here and are particularly attractive on the wing. Sarus Cranes patrol the margins of the lake, and have bred here in the past. The avian 'stars' in this part of the zoo must be the group of Dalmatian Pelicans, which had several nests



on one of the islands. Unfortunately some of their eggs had been stolen by Gibbons.

Promising well for the future is Paignton's second pair of Marabou Storks, the male bred here in 2011 paired to a female bred in Holland. The breeding Marabou Storks have an aviary on the edge of the lake, and Peter Smallbones has written up the achievement in the Magazine. The current trend towards housing storks full-winged in aviaries should lead to more general breeding results. Only the White Stork has ever had much success pinioned in open enclosures.

The lushly planted Reptile Tropics is one of a series of walk-through greenhouses. Here reptiles are confined to glass fronted or floor level enclosures, while birds fly freely. What the visitor sees here depends on the number of people about. Earlier in the day I saw Emerald starlings walking about on the paths, but by the time of our tour, when the place was relatively crowded, they were high in the trees. A corner aviary held a pair of Visayan Tarsier Hornbills. Good numbers of Speckled Mousebirds – obviously a thriving colony – were flying about and hanging from branches in their un-birdlike way. Reptile Tropics is a part of this lovely zoo where one could sit still for hours and see what came into view. The list of species on the wall is considerably longer than one might see on a quick walk through. We saw Pied Imperial Pigeon, Orange Headed Ground Thrush and Hooded Pitta, as well as a self sustaining colony of Black-headed Weavers.

Leaving Reptile Tropics, one enters a smaller, but still lofty, walk-through, with Nicobar Pigeons, Red-crested Touraco and Mountain Witch Doves.

The Desert is another long walk-through glass-house, with appropriate planting, enclosed reptiles and free flying birds based on the same principle as Reptile Tropics. A few years ago this area was graced by a flock of Red-billed Queleas, now sadly dwindled in numbers as breeding fails to keep up with losses. In the absence of further importations – or serious efforts at sustained breeding -- this is one of many species that will disappear from aviculture in the next few years. The colony of Cutthroats appears to be thriving and maintaining numbers well. Hooded Parrakeets have bred here, in an artificial termite mound, and were sitting at the time of our visit. Bourke's and Princess of Wales Parrakeets demonstrated how very beautiful both species can be, in sustained flight which is not possible in the average garden aviary. A single aging Stone Curlew was in evidence, but I did not see any of the Scaled Quail which used to grace the ground area. Both Crested Bronzewing Pigeons – another spectacular flyer with their whistling flight, and entirely appropriate in a desert setting – and Diamond Doves live here. Superb Spreos have recently been added, reflecting their breeding success at Paignton, and a suggestion that they might look good



in here, which they do.

On higher ground at the back of the zoo is the 'Primley', some of which is a relic of earlier times. The 'Cottage' aviary – originally designed to look like an old fashioned country cottage, with garden, traditionally housed small seedeaters in numbers. It now holds Grey Gulls, which co-exist happily with Red-billed Choughs, Palawan Peacock Pheasants and Lapwings. Apparently, and unexpectedly for a gull, they do not take the other birds' eggs. Some fairly traditional aviaries for owls and parrots are large enough for vegetation to survive – not always possible when there are parrot beaks or owl droppings to contend with. The Malay Fish Owls here have so far produced only infertile eggs, but it is hoped they will go on to emulate the Brown Fish Owls that bred here in the 1980s. Among the rarer birds here was a female Eastern White Stork awaiting a partner, and living amicably in a netted-over paddock with a pair of Brown Eared Pheasants. With their digging habits, too many eared pheasant enclosures resemble ploughed fields, and it was good to see these beautiful birds here on grass.

To conclude these notes, I need to mention just a few of the many significant mammals at Paignton. As well as the bachelor group of Western Lowland Gorillas, one of whom recently went to London Zoo to join their three females, we were privileged to see the latest baby Bornean Orangutan, born on 11<sup>th</sup> April. She was out on one of the islands, hanging on her mother, who supported the baby with one arm, and kept her own body between the new baby and the public. Other mammalian 'stars' here are the veteran African Elephant, apparently quite happy in her spacious quarters despite the loss of an eye, and of her long-time Asian Elephant companion. When she dies she will not be replaced. Much smaller, but very active, and perhaps the only one in the UK, is Paignton's lone Echidna. I remember seeing these in nocturnal houses, relatively somnolent much of the time. This one, housed outside with heat lamps, is usually trundling about.

I am no botanist, but Paignton has been known for its plants since the early days, and they remain a prominent feature – the Swamp Cabbage around the Orang islands is particularly impressive.

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## AVICULTURAL SOCIETY SPRING SOCIAL MEETING AT NEWQUAY ZOO

by Nigel Hewston

The second venue on our weekend visit to westcountry collections was Newquay Zoo, where we spent a very interesting morning in the company of Senior Bird Keeper Gary Ward. The zoo is one of a number of leisure attractions situated in a municipal park. Having started many years ago as a privately-owned seasonal tourist attraction, it was later taken over by the local council before being acquired by the Herbert Whitley Trust, which also runs Paignton Zoo and Living Coasts at Torquay.

The zoo is compact, but packs a lot into a small site, with an interesting range of bird and other species, housed in a mixture of modern enclosures and older ones, a number of which have been adapted to good effect to house, and breed, species other than those for which they were built.

Birds are immediately apparent on entry, with a lake which is being developed as an African wetland exhibit. Species here include West African Crowned Crane *Balearica p.pavonina*, White Storks *Ciconia ciconia* and Comb Ducks *Sarkidiornis m.melanotos*, and is also currently home to Hooded Mergansers *Lophodytes cucullatus*. Continuing the African theme, which also included a new area for hoofstock, was a recently-built aviary housing Napoleon Weavers *Euplectes afer* and Blacksmith Plovers *Vanellus armatus*. Elsewhere and I think uniquely among UK zoos, there is an offshow breeding facility for waxbills, fronted by an aviary exhibit. Results here have been mixed, but the zoo is determined to continue working with difficult species such as Purple Grenadiers *Uraeginthus ianthinogaster*, which are rarely seen in public collections.

Birds from other continents are also well represented, with a large, well planted aviary shared by Black Hornbills *Anthracoceros malayanus* and



Schofield, Philip. 2013. "Avicultural Society Spring Social Meeting At Paignton Zoo." *The Avicultural magazine* 119(4), 177–181.

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