

Where the Deer and the Antelope (and the Birds!) Play: Setting your bird/hoofstock multi-species habitats up for success

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So, I hear you're toying with the idea of trying a bird/ungulate multi-species habitat at your zoo? Congratulations! The benefits of multi-taxa habitats are numerous. Before you get started, though, there are many things to consider in order to set yourself, your team, and most importantly, your multi-species habitat up for success.

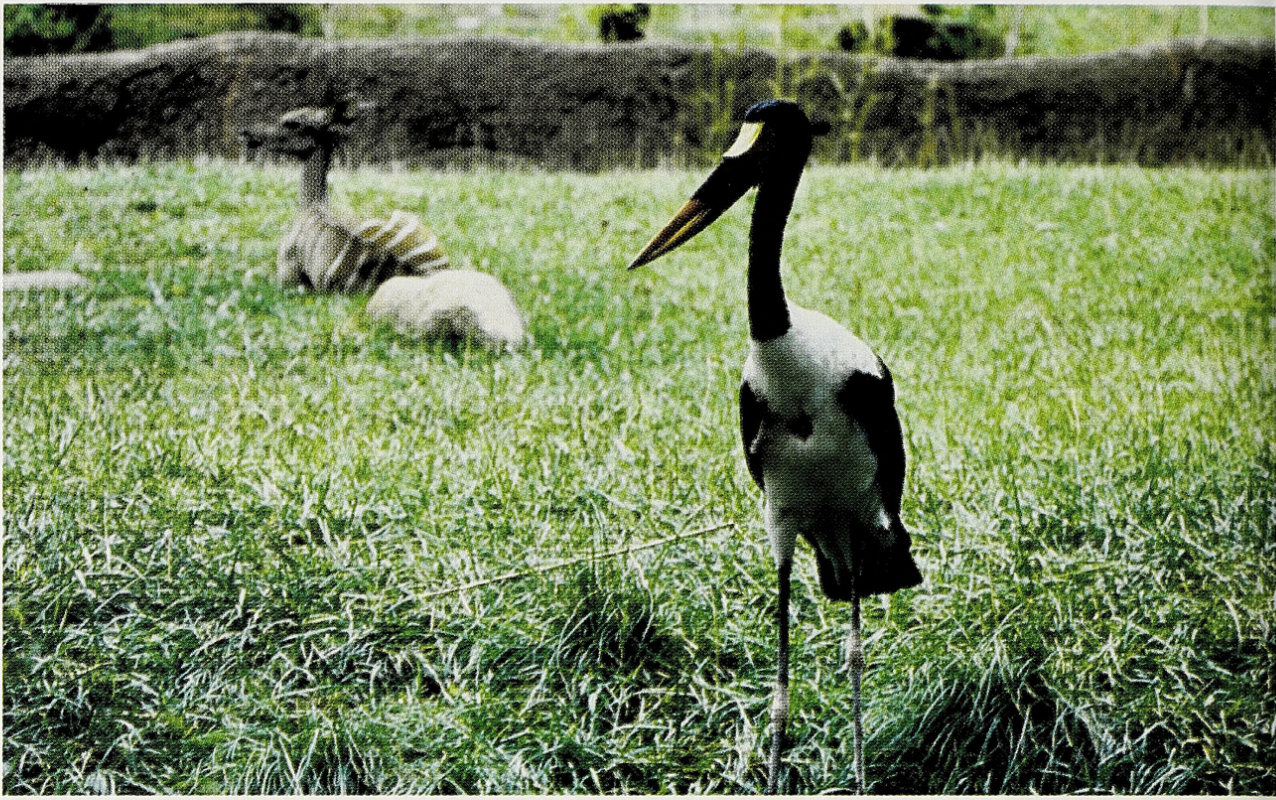
Teamwork

Starting a new multi-taxa habitat is an excellent opportunity for bird and ungulate care teams to work together. It is important that both groups are involved in the development and implementation of this new habitat to benefit from the taxa-focused expertise of both groups, and also benefit from the new, fresh perspectives that can be gained by asking your teams to think outside of their taxa-focused box. When managing a habitat as a team, it is important to figure out early-on what will be expected of both teams throughout the process of developing the multi-taxa habitat and eventually maintaining the habitat once it is established. Communication and flexibility are key to the long-term success of any team-managed multi-taxa habitat.



Giraffe and ostrich are commonly exhibited together in mixed-species habitats.

Photo courtesy of the Saint Louis Zoo



A Saddlebilled stork and lesser kudu at the Saint Louis Zoo. *Photo by Chuck Dresner*

Do your homework!

It is important to do your homework when thinking about establishing a new bird/ungulate multi-species habitat. Fortunately, a lot of zoos have experience with multi-taxa habitats, and there is a wealth of information available on this topic. Spend time talking with colleagues about what has worked and, just as importantly, what hasn't. Review the available resources on this topic, such as the AZA Antelope and Giraffe TAG Mixed Species Resource Manual. Attend bird and ungulate TAG meetings to find out which species are available, which species are good candidates for sharing space with other taxa and which SSPs are in need of additional space and support.

Facility evaluation

Not every outdoor habitat will be appropriate for mixing ungulates and birds. Depending on the species you are hoping to manage together, you will need to closely evaluate the outdoor facilities to be certain that they will contain the species of birds and ungulates you are hoping to manage together and will be safe for all of the animals involved. This close evaluation may illuminate the need for modifications to accommodate all species, such as a higher containment barrier, a bird-only feeding area, additional shade structures, etc. Additionally, any indoor holding spaces that might be used to support this multi-taxa habitat should be evaluated for both birds and ungulates, as well.

Seasonal needs

Seasonal needs for all species should be considered and, as needed, modifications should be made to make sure all animals' needs are met all year-round. Are there enough weather shelters available in the habitat for all individuals, both ungulates and birds, to escape the sun, wind, rain and snow? If you are hoping that your ungulates and/or birds will reproduce, do the facilities allow for this to occur in a manner that optimizes reproduction and rearing of young without disturbance from the other taxa sharing the habitat and without disturbance from your keepers maintaining the habitat?

Daily routine

As you are doing your homework early-on, you should think through the daily routine for all of the habitat's residents and decide how all of the animal care and habitat maintenance duties will

be performed each day. This is also a good time to consider which duties will fall to which keeper team – and split the animal care and habitat maintenance tasks between the bird department and the ungulate department in a way that works well for everyone.

Proper training

Anytime a new exhibit is initiated, it is important to provide adequate animal care and management training to your teams. If you are adding a new bird species to an ungulate habitat, it is important to familiarize your ungulate team with that species so that they can make sure they have the correct tools and skills to care for the species. On the flipside, if you are acquiring a new ungulate species for a bird habitat, it is important that your bird team be familiar with that species so that they can make sure they are prepared to manage that species appropriately. Cross-training on bird behavior and/or ungulate behavior is essential to make sure that the keepers who are responsible for managing a bird/ungulate habitat are knowledgeable about both taxa.

Tools of the trade

If you are adding birds to your ungulate area for the first time, it will be necessary to stock up on bird care equipment such as nets, appropriately-sized crates, gloves and safety glasses if those tools are not already present in the area. Additionally, specific tools for bird care, such as tools to trim wings, beaks, and nails should be available.

Guidelines

To be certain that all animals in a multi-taxa habitat – both birds and ungulates – receive the care they need and deserve, it is important to provide guidelines for their care up front. Be sure to provide guidelines not only for the basic day-to-day care that they receive, but also provide guidelines for enrichment and training, manual restraint and temperature that have been discussed and agreed upon by all involved in the team management of the bird/ungulate habitat.

Looking ahead

A certain amount of proactive management is required for managing birds and ungulates together in the same habitat. If the habitats are open, as many are, and if the birds are full-winged, a protocol and schedule for wing-trimming will need to be decided upon. Additionally, routine weighing and deworming will need to be scheduled to monitor the birds' health throughout the year. It is important to discuss not only when these procedures will occur each year, but also which team will be responsible for scheduling and performing them.

What if...

If all of the above steps have been methodically followed, then most of the time the bird/ungulate habitat will work well. However, what if it doesn't? If you attempt enough bird/ungulate combinations, at some point there will be a species:species mix that doesn't work or an individual bird or an individual ungulate that turns out to be a poor candidate for sharing space with others. It may be that the habitat that you thought would work perfectly doesn't actually work well for managing birds and ungulates together. Though you cannot predict the future and know what will and won't work, you can give this a bit of thought in advance and have a plan on the back burner just in case something doesn't work out.

Herds of a feather

Whether your first love is ungulates or birds, we are all facing similar challenges when it comes to maintaining sustainable populations and developing exhibits that our visitors will enjoy. Ungulate/bird multi-species habitats aren't the answer for every ungulate and bird species, but with good planning and teamwork, it can be a good option for many species. By working together and managing our birds and ungulates in shared spaces, we can maximize the use of our limited zoo space. By being flexible and communicating frequently, bird and ungulate teams will find that managing bird/ungulate multi-species habitats can be a hugely rewarding answer to some of the challenges that both taxa are facing in zoos today.



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