Each of us had crazy childhood fantasies and one of mine was about animals of all types. It was a crazy fantasy of empathizing with them and wanting to interact. Animal movies and books led to family outings to zoos and museums and then to pets of every kind at home. A career in my father's business was abandoned when I discovered an outstanding rare bird collection belonging to Alex Isenberg. A pioneer with softbills, he insisted that all of his diets should be totally organic without any prepared foods. Work just didn't seem that important.

College in the late sixties just ran out of control and a biology major only required Biology I and eight additional courses. I'm not exactly sure what went on on campus but I was set free to take every field course offered and happily missed out on chemistry, physics, genetics, statistics, microbiology, and all of the tedious courses that compose the majority of course requirements. After receiving my Bachelor's degree I went on to San Diego for graduate work and, alas, with parental aid gone, I commenced driving a tour bus at the San Diego Zoo, and my zoo experience began. After a thousand tours over a two year span I could recite my tour without realizing it until the tourists would start chuckling - they didn't believe that deer laid the biggest egg of any bird. What I did learn was based on simple day to day observations of populations dynamics of a large collection.

The incredible inspiration of my first visits gave way to my first disillusionment - zoos prior to 1970 were not breeding centers for exotic animals. Although many, many first breedings were recorded, they were usually achieved in large group flights. Properly accommodated, a given pair of birds may have a 50% chance for success in a given aviary, but place 100 pairs in the same aviary and the chance may drop to only 2%. With a hundred pairs, one is guaranteed some success although it will rarely be consistent from year to year as proved to be the case. But then there really was no real reason to be concerned because birds were very inexpensive at this time - barely 10% of their present cost and they were available without all our present quarantine procedures, permit requirements or general concern. Accurate inventories were rarely kept and records were based on expected needs - not something one automatically did.

When I went to San Francisco I was going to change all of this. I was hired at the San Francisco Zoo to prepare for opening a large indoor tropical flight cage. It was the last few months before the bird embargo went into effect and buying birds from the extensive lists provided was a childhood dream come true. Tanagers were $3.00 each with fifteen different species offered. Call up at 8 a.m. and your order would arrive at the airport the following day. The collectors just caught the birds and shipped them, charging you more for their time than the birds they shipped because, generally, they didn't even bother to identify them. One never knew quite what to expect. One friend received a large number of piranhas — carnivorous fish — some of which he still has today. Reform was not to come at this time. At conferences, great ideas were discussed and everybody tried to, at least, pair everything up regardless of its natural social structure. Money however, was not always available and except for an occasional new exhibit, aviaries were still designed without specific occupants in mind. Collections started to fall apart noticeably. Due to the newly established embargo no replacements were available. My worst suspicions were confirmed. After a few outspoken words on what I would do if I ran the zoo, a very dear friend gave me some sage advice. What I knew to be true, I was told, was not only true but worse than I realized. Furthermore, it was common in many zoos and had always been so. If I spoke up, I would simply be replaced by another who would mind the shop quietly. So swallowing my pride, I hung on and was determined to climb to the top and be a great zoo director.

Convinced that it was just my particular situation, in April 1973 I accepted the position of Curator of Birds at the L.A. Zoo. The embargo was lifted but at first primarily pet trade birds entered the country and they were quite expensive and people stood in line to buy anything, at any cost. The first people to open quarantine stations made fortunes overnight. Many wonderful changes were beginning to take place and in my new position I was able to travel and see many zoos first-hand. The Bronx Zoo built an aquatic bird house with environments designed for specific birds followed by an even larger tropical building whose success can be appreciated only by seeing it, and measured by the number of other zoos that have since attempted to copy it. Facilities began to simply be closed off. A rare animal by itself ceased to be enough reason for its place in the zoo—a trend I am delighted to see continue. Off exhibit breeding areas popped up across the country and spectacular results were seen. Guy Greenwell, Curator of Birds at the National Zoo, called me one day to offer in trade a pair of vulturine guinea fowl, a bird rarely bred at that time.
for a few birds he was interested in. Later I
found out he had raised 122 guineas that
year. But it was more than just this one
species. He had done it with roul roul
partridge, argus pheasant, and piping
guans to mention a few. Other zoos were
doing similar projects with interesting re-
results. The Bronx Zoo, as usual, seemed to
be trying to do it the hard way, picking the
most bizarre birds possible—pittas, tawny
frogmouths, and green wood hoopoes to
mention three with which they had excel-
ent results. Their support and cooperation
with other zoos led a very strong trend
away from the stamp collection of old and
into a new era. One of the most significant
developments was the evolution of a new
avicultrist's position called by many dif-
erent names in different zoos but in es-
sence one who is free of paperwork, meet-
ings and office politics and whose primary
interest is breeding birds. Every successful
collection has this person and at the L.A.
Zoo without Dale Thompson much of
what I was able to accomplish would not
have been possible.

Zoo animal collections are different
from private collections in many respects.
Except for a minor percentage of off-
hibit areas, the birds must contend with
the everyday dealings with the rock throw-
ing, cage pounding, camera flashing pub-
ic. The second major problem is that most
zoos use hired help as opposed to knowl-
edgeable concerned aviculturists to care
for the animals. At the L.A. Zoo, it is
general knowledge the three most im-
portant factors for picking the specific string
of animals one desired to care for were 1)
days off, 2) hours worked, 3) physical
amount of work involved. Only one out of
70 keepers first request was to work with a
specific animal.

On the good side, a zoo is a bureauac-
ricy that in general is tied to an even larger
city bureaucracy that generates some fi-
nancial stability. It is immune from di-
 vorce, rapidly changing interests, and the
financial set-back of an expensive death. It
can afford to wait things out and try again
and again. Supportive services can be pro-
vided that are unheard of primarily such as
security, vet care by specialists, travel
benefits to visit other collections and hort-
iculture benefits. Zoos across the world
are still primarily recreational facilities to
offer the public the enjoyment of seeing
exotic animals. They have time for con-
servation and research programs that re-
cently have produced many significant
results. In future issues I will explore
many of these new developments in breed-
ing, aviary design, and other new concepts
that could apply to private breeding pro-
gr...