

Birds at the Dallas World Aquarium

by Shelly Nice, Dallas, TX

The Dallas World Aquarium, no longer just a place to see fish, is celebrating the first anniversary of a permanent South American rainforest exhibit. The privately owned aquarium allows visitors a glimpse of the flora and fauna from places that many may never see in person, such as Lord Howe Island, Banggai Island, and Venezuela. The aquarium contains several large exhibits of marine life from around the world, including a walk-through tunnel and an outdoor penguin exhibit. The seven-story tall rainforest begins at tree top level and winds down under the river.

Rainforest animals include Red Howler Monkeys, Jaguars, Orinoco Crocodiles, toucans, curassows, and many more. A thirty-foot waterfall, part of the free-flight aviary, cascades into the 200,000 gallon freshwater tank. Live vegetation includes more than five hundred species of plants, including thirty-foot tall palm trees, lianas, and bromeliads. Each part of the rainforest is uniquely enjoyed by the birds — bathing at the top of the waterfall, playing with flowers, displaying nesting behavior in the palm trees, and drinking from the bromeliads. Toucans are the most numerous birds at the facility, with most of them living together in the free-flight aviary.

Many toucan experts in the United States were consulted prior to the grouping of the different species. Multi-species toucan exhibits are common in South American zoos, even with the Emerald Toucanet (presumably these will kill all other toucans if placed in a exhibit with them). Even though many people predicted the combining of the various species would not last one month, the birds have now lived together for more than one year.

Territories have been established, with each species usually staying together except when feeding. The Keel-billed and Swainson's Toucans seem to co-exist more closely than do

the other birds. When food is first introduced, it is the smaller birds like the Black-necked and the Green Aracari that eat first — before the larger toucans fly in to eat. Even larger birds such as curassows will wait for the toucans to eat before getting their share.

Nesting is another story. The nesting sites of the Black-necked Aracari are taken over by the Keel-billed, regardless of location. Even though toucans soon abandon the nests when they discover they are too small, the aracari do not return to their originally owned nest. Nest-stealing does not result in physical confrontation. Toucans merely move into nests they find unattended and the smaller birds never try to regain ownership after they see the nest is filled. Hollowed out palm logs are offered throughout the rainforest but they have, however, been completely

ignored with live palm trees being preferred. This is probably due to all of the live vegetation.

Silver-beaked, Blue-gray, and Palm Tanagers can be heard more readily than seen in the rainforest. Although once you hear them they are easily seen. They eat a variety of fruits, worms, and seeds. They will stay together or close by each other. Although they are the last ones to eat fruit, they will be the first ones to arrive when food is put out in the morning. They will perch with toucans just a foot away and wait their turn. Periodically one of these birds will disappear, but it is a very rare occasion.

Sunbitterns, Roseate Spoonbills, Scarlet, and Buff-necked Ibises have also paired up and are exhibiting breeding behaviors. Sunbitterns do a mating dance with a mixture of whistles. The Spoonbills and ibises have their breeding plumage but have not built nests or laid eggs. These birds are usually not near the toucans, probably because they eat different foods and are found lower in the rainforest.



Scarlet Ibis, Buff-necked ibis, and Roseate spoonbills.

Photo by Shelly Nice

Spoonbills spend most of their day near the edge of the water where they hunt for fish and worms. Ibises rarely go near the water and are usually found in the upper part of the rainforest eating worms, crickets, and anything else they can find. The Sunbitterns are found throughout the exhibit and love to catch minnows from the shoreline. All of these birds search for and capture their food. Live insects are put out every day, always in different places so the animals have to hunt for their food. Each body of water contains live minnows and shallow places for easy wading and catching of food. This is good enrichment for the birds and much



Helmeted Curassow.

Photos by Shelly Nice



Swainson's Toucan drinking out of a bromiliad.

healthier than providing bowls of processed food. There is no fighting for food and they will eat peacefully side by side.

Orinoco Geese and White-faced Whistling Ducks live on and around the island that is in the middle of the 200,000 gallon freshwater tank. They feed on the vegetation in the water and on pellets found on the shallow bridge going out to the island. They spend most of their time on the island and enjoy foraging for worms alongside the shore birds.

The one group of birds that seem to not get along are the Helmeted and Yellow-knobbed Curassows. All of the curassows are females — perhaps the reason for their misbehavior. The individual species get along with each other, but fight with the other species. The Helmeted are more aggressive and will chase the Yellow-knobbed Curassows. Curassows eat almost everything — they forage for worms, crickets, and other live food but they also eat a variety of fruits, vegetables, bread, lettuce, grit, and much more. They can be found throughout the rainforest but usually close to the lower level, often seen running on the floor or lying in a planter.

Although these animals are commonly found in zoos, the successful living together of the various species is not often seen in captivity. After one year of being together, the birds seem to be getting along very well and with a new breeding season soon to begin, perhaps there will be some new additions to The Dallas World Aquarium. 