

Texas Zoo Birds 2001

(Part I)

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Several places in the United States hold especially rich concentrations of public exhibits of living animals. The tourism-heavy states of California and Florida come to mind at once. The densely populated Great Lakes Region, and the Eastern Seaboard from Baltimore to Boston are two more. Then there is Texas, which has long been famous for collections with an encyclopedic emphasis on biodiversity.

The ISIS Aves Abstract for 31 December, 1999 lists 614 taxa of birds distributed among the 15 Texas institutions that submit data to the International Species Information System. I have found this figure is not complete, even among these participating collections, and if one added the holdings of those Texas collections not yet listed by ISIS, the number would be substantially larger.

Along with some of the world's largest "mainstream" public zoos, long operated by municipalities or non-profit organizations, Texas has an unusual number of privately owned facilities with remarkable bird collections which are open to visitors.

On the occasion of the impending AFA National Convention at Houston, I thought it appropriate to review significant Texas bird exhibits, beginning with those near the borders of the state.

El Paso Zoo

Located in the far western corner of Texas, El Paso has been the traditional point of entry for those traveling overland from California, and, more

recently, its airport has become a stopover for economy flights going in and out of the state. For years, the El Paso Zoo occupied only five acres, in a downtown location that was easily overlooked. As I found to my dismay, if one missed the zoo, one was quite likely to end up in the line of cars crossing the border to the large much larger city of Juarez, and could not usually get out of line until already in Mexico. This could of course be disastrous to internationals traveling on a tourist visa. In the 1990s, the zoo was able to expand into adjoining land, increasing its area to 18 acres.

In the 1980s the zoo attracted international attention when it opened its South American Building, where a variety of birds, small mammals, reptiles, amphibians, and freshwater and marine fishes are exhibited in a series of mostly glass-fronted natural displays. Bird exhibits in this building include one shared by Silver-billed and Blue-Grey Tanagers, Red-crested Cardinals, Red-rumped Caciques, Green Aracaris, Golden Lion Tamarins, and large freshwater fishes, as well as separate enclosures with Blue-crowned Motmots, Red Siskins, Troupials, Peruvian Thick-knees, Grey-winged Trumpeters and other species.

The expansion of the 1990's allowed construction of a beautiful indoor Asian complex, where, along with such creatures as pythons and Malay Tapirs, Spotted Whistling Ducks, Great Hornbills, White-throated Kingfishers, Black-naped Fruit Doves, Golden-fronted Leafbirds, Bali

Mynahs, and one of the last Red-wattled Lapwings in the U.S. may be seen.

The other zoogeographical area emphasized at El Paso is North America, and the collection of native birds is remarkable. Exhibited in outdoor facilities are American Avocets, Sanderlings, Swainson's Hawks, Red-headed Woodpeckers, Dunlins, Killdeers, Horned Larks, Northern Oriole, Yellow-headed Blackbirds, Eastern Meadowlarks, and Evening Grosbeaks.

Abilene Zoological Gardens

Approximately two-thirds of the long stretch of Interstate 20 from El Paso to the Fort Worth-Dallas Metroplex, one passes through Abilene. Here is another zoo specializing in the fauna of several regions – in this case Texas, Central America, Tropical Africa, and Madagascar. At present, as far as exhibits are concerned, Texas birds are largely represented by a small flock of Sandhill Cranes, and an attractive collection of North American waterfowl that share an entrance exhibit with African waterfowl and a flock of Lesser Flamingoes. However, behind scenes, a Western Tanager, Yellow-headed Blackbirds, and other native passerines await a future exhibit. On the other hand, a colony of the critically endangered Attwater's Prairie Chicken (the last subtropical grouse) is intended entirely for off-exhibit propagation, a vital boost to the tiny wild population. In 2000, 13 were reared, from parents selected from Fossil Rim Wildlife Center, and the San Antonio and Houston Zoos.

Another off-exhibit propagation project has been set up for a pair of African Crowned Eagles, on loan from the San Diego Zoo. Abilene has a long history of breeding African birds, being among the first institutions to propagate Secretary Birds, in the 1980s, and Abyssinian Ground Hornbills in the 70s. Both species are still to be seen there, the Ground Hornbills with Reticulated Giraffes, the Secretary Birds in an outdoor aviary where they have proved surprisingly cold tolerant.

Other African birds exhibited out of doors include a fine male Somali

Ostrich, a very old Blacksmith Plover, Blue-bellied Rollers, Golden-breasted Starlings, a prolific pair of Trumpeter Hornbills, and Erckel's Francolins. Indoors, in the zoo's innovative discovery center, is a walk-through aviary housing some out-of-the-ordinary species. I was delighted to find that the Grey-backed Sparrow Lark, *Eremopteryx verticalis*, present at my first visit in 1991, is still very much alive and well 10 years later. It remains the only specimen of this Southern African endemic I have seen, and is probably the only live specimen in North America (it has never been listed in ISIS). The same is likely true for the two Crimsonwings of a so far undetermined species (*Cryptospiza* sp.). These African finches are furtive, and I was not able to find them in the undergrowth. However two male Orange-winged Pytilias *Pytilia afra* were quite visible. Again, this is the only U.S. public exhibit of these relatives of the Melba Finch. Aside from the one in this aviary, the only other American zoo specimens of the Arrow-marked Babbler *Turdoides jardineii* are at the San Diego Zoo, while Golden-breasted Buntings *Emberiza flaviventris* can otherwise be seen only at Dallas, where, I believe Abilene's birds were hatched.

Until the passage of the Wild Bird Conservation Act in 1993, Paradise Whydahs were not considered a rarity, but their captive propagation certainly has been. It is possible Abilene achieved a U.S. first breeding some years ago. However, the young bird simply appeared one day, and no one is certain which of the several sorts of seed-eaters then present acted as the host species. Among other current inhabitants of this aviary are a Green Wood Hoopoe, a Woodland Kingfisher, a couple of Blue-throated Carmine Bee-Eaters, and a stately African Speckled Pigeon, an inhabitant of this building since its opening a decade ago.

**The Frank J. Smith
Bird Sanctuary**

The Texas Panhandle is not known for zoos. The one in Lubbock closed years ago. There is a venerable

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zoo in Amarillo, and plans call for its eventual expansion, but at present, its bird collection is minimal. I was therefore most surprised to hear reports of a public aviary in Borger, a city I confess to not having heard of before, practically in the middle of the Panhandle, equidistant from New Mexico and Oklahoma.

The Frank J. Smith Bird Sanctuary is a complex of aviaries reached by footbridges over a ring-shaped pond inhabited by Bar-headed Geese, Black Swans, and other waterfowl. At present the inhabitants are primarily the commoner sorts of ornamental pheasants, and flocks of Cockatiels and Budgerigars. One of the cages is glass-fronted, and currently contains Zebra Finches, but a local aviculturist has promised some Gouldians. The Sanctuary was opened by the City Park Department about a decade ago. Recently, considerable effort has been made to refurbish and maintain it. Funds for bird acquisition are presently short, so offers of donat-

ed birds, especially larger psittacines, may prove welcome.

Fort Worth Zoological Park

For about 10 years from the mid-1980s, eyebrows were raised when such publications as the International Zoo Yearbook showed Fort Worth to have the largest collection of animal species and subspecies in the United States – around 900. Most of these were fishes and reptiles. However, in the first half of the 1990s, the bird collection was comparatively large, with nearly 200 taxa. Since then, a redirection in administrative philosophy has resulted in a stream-lined collection, with more of an emphasis on message conveyance rather than encyclopedic representation. At present, Fort Worth's bird collection is about half the size it was in the mid-1990s. In particular, the finches of Africa have been dispersed to other collections, as well as many psittacines and aquatic species. However, the Fort Worth bird collection remains an important one, with a strong emphasis on

conservation significant species.

The breeding pair of Wrinkled Hornbills (Lindholm, 1999) has produced chicks every year since 1997, and, in 2000, successfully reared two for the first time. The pair of Rothschild's Peacock Pheasants (generally considered the last full species of pheasant to be brought into captivity) first produced chicks in 1999, the only U.S. zoo breeding that year. The same distinction holds for the four Malay Crested Firebacks hatched from a wild-caught pair. Fort Worth also exhibits a wild-caught breeding pair of Malay Crestless Firebacks, as well as a trio of absolutely pure Satyr Tragopans, a species seen in only a handful of U.S. zoos at present. There have been repeated successes with Malay Argus Pheasants, and Fort Worth has added to its stock the pair from Disney's Discovery Island (dispersed in 2000). While Impeyan Monals are not a great rarity in U.S. zoos, it appears the pair to shortly arrive at Fort Worth will be the only specimens of this magnificent pheasant on public exhibit in Texas.

Grebes have always been a challenge to maintain for any length of time, but a Pied-billed Grebe (a species otherwise exhibited only at the Virginia Zoological Park in Norfolk) looks wonderful after more than two years in captivity. It shares a pond near the aquarium with a distinguished assemblage of waterfowl, including a small flock of rarely exhibited Javan Whistling Ducks, Black-necked Swans (which have a long and distinguished breeding record at Fort Worth), Red-breasted and Lesser White-fronted Geese (both threatened species), Smew, Marbled Teal, North American Ruddy Ducks (including a striking melanistic female), Buffleheads, and Falcated Teal. Another beautiful series of waterfowl, among them Puna Teal, Red Shovelers, Eyton's Whistling Ducks, Southern Yellowbills, Old World Comb Ducks, Tufted Ducks, and European Wigeons, lives near the Zoo's entrance, with Lesser and Caribbean Flamingoes, and a breeding flock of Chilean Flamingoes (housed separately from the others). Other waterfowl, such as a pair of Hartlaub's Duck's, Baikal Teal, and more Smews,

Photo by Natalie Mashburn Lindholm



The uncommonly beautiful Common Shelduck at the Fort Worth Zoological Park.

can be found in various aviaries, while a single Magellanic Flightless Steamer shares an indoor exhibit in the James R. Record Aquarium with a colony of Black-footed Penguins (more would wreak havoc). The impending arrival of Black Spur-winged Geese, to be exhibited near the Giraffes, will add further distinction to this unusually representative collection of Anatids.

Specially designed enclosures hold a male and female wild-caught Kori Bustards, as well as a Dallas-hatched female, and a young pair of Red-crowned, or Manchurian Cranes, part of an importation from the Shenyang Zoo, in the People's Republic of China, coordinated by the Fort Worth Zoo. Among the psittacines, a flock of Thick-billed Parrots, assembled by the AZA's Species Survival Plan for this species, stands out. The famous female Harpy Eagle, at Fort Worth more than 40 years, recently died from geriatric-related tumors, but its mate, itself over 25 years old, on long-term loan from the zoo in Jackson, Mississippi, was successfully rematched with the first fully-reared U.S.-bred specimen, hatched at the San Diego Zoo. Though only six years old, it is already substantially larger than the male.

Intensive efforts at propagation, both on and off exhibit, are being made for two species of passerines. Since 1993, Fort Worth has been seriously committed to establishing the enigmatic Yellow-throated Laughing Thrush *Garrulax galbanus* (Lindholm, 1997). The only hatchings reported by ISIS anywhere in the world in 1999 were three, hatched in what had previously been an off-exhibit finch facility. Pairs of this beautiful bird may also be seen on display in two locations. Fort Worth has also led in creating a self-sustaining population of Northern Green Jays, to be maintained by Texas zoos. Green Jays enter the United States only in Texas, and are one of the more famous attractions for the birders who flock to the Lower Rio Grande Valley. ISIS listed 27 specimens distributed among eight Texas collections at the end of 1999, but only Fort Worth hatched any that year.



Watch for Part 2 in the next issue.