

# The Houston Zoo Invitation.

## Y'all Come, Hear?

by Sheldon Dingle, Alhambra, California

**"L**et's visit the zoo." As a kid, I loved to hear those words. As an old geezer, I still love to hear those words. And, no doubt, so do you. Among the chief reasons to attend an AFA convention is to have a good time. Fun is the word. Well, we are in luck. The Houston Zoological Gardens has issued an invitation to all of us.

One of the highlights of the AFA Convention in Houston will be the good time we'll have at the zoo. And good food, too. I am told there will be a real Texas style Barbecue and, folks, you ain't seen a barbecue until you've seen one in Texas. Do you know that the esteemed Dr. Benny Gallaway, Texan by birth, AFA President by demand, has a monster barbecue that has to be hitched to a truck to be moved? One has to climb three stairs to reach the grill level. It looked like it could handle three sides of beef at once and it requires a crew to operate it. If this is the ordinary backyard Texas barbecue grill, imagine what a huge organization like the zoo must have.

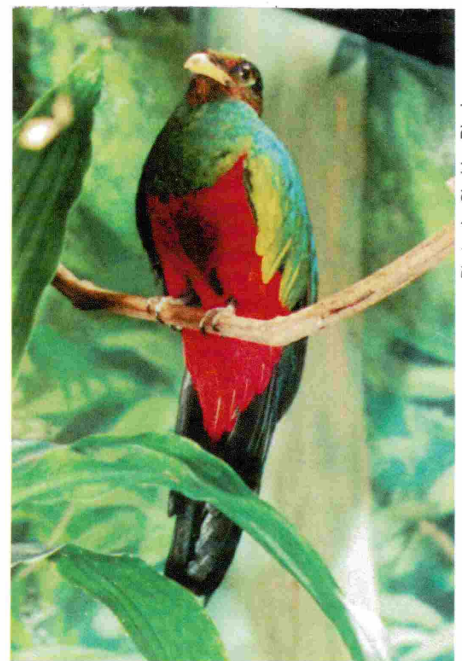
For sure the barbecue at the zoo will be something no one will forget.

Then there is the zoo facility itself. I haven't seen a map but my last visit (April of this year) makes me think the zoo is a great, green 55-acre oasis in the middle of downtown Houston. One minute you are surrounded by buildings and businesses, the next you are entering the cool, quiet sanctuary of the zoo. It is a wonderful transition.

The zoo was founded in 1920 and today is home to nearly 6000 animals representing about 720 species. It has an annual attendance of 1.5 million and has a world wide reputation for its dedicated conservation work. You may recall that the AFA has been involved with the Houston Zoo in its efforts to work with the Spix's Macaw. There are many other conservation works afoot, also.

My favorite conservation program is the one involving the Attwater's Prairie Chicken. At my last visit I made friends with a very salty male Attwater's Prairie Chicken. He really strutted his stuff, booming all the while – a real showoff. As this breeding facility is off-exhibit, it was a sight few people have ever seen. The zoo has three trios and four pairs of these colorful but endangered American birds and has been very successful in breeding them. Last year 180 chicks were raised. The general plan is to put the first clutch in an artificial incubator then let foster chickens or the Attwater's hen raise the second clutch. When the time comes, the chicks are released at Eagle Lake, Texas, which, I assume is pure prairie.

Although not everyone has the opportunity to visit the Prairie Chickens, there are plenty of other venues for bird lovers. My favorite is the climate controlled Tropical Bird House. The huge two storey (or more) enclosure is kept at a temperature and level of humidity that is suitable for tropical birds. Along some walkways are individual inclosures to be viewed from the path. As I am a person attracted to bright col-




Golden-headed Quetzal

ors, the Golden-headed Quetzal Bird's bright crimson breast and vent were like a brilliant stop light that demanded I stop and look. You couldn't paint a more vividly colored bird. And the enclosure allows one to get pretty close to the birds and really enjoy the magnificent creation of nature.

There is a large bridge that traverses the tropical bird House. Birds are above you, at eye level, and below. You seem to be on a suspension bridge in a tropical forest (but not to worry, the bridge is solid concrete). The occasional bird will park on the rail and look you straight in the eye – up close and personal is the word for the Tropical bird house. When the heat and humidity finally persuade you to move on, there are additional enclosures for birds outside.

There are also the tigers, lions, gorillas, seals, camels, bats, indeed, about every kind of animal you can think of. The zoo is a veritable Noah's Ark. Animal lovers cannot be disappointed.

As an AFA member, there will be an added joy. You'll share the experience with dear old comrades and brand new friends. And you'll meet some of the zoo personnel, too. We AFA folks are a community. What better than to have a community party at the world class Houston Zoo. Don't miss it. See you there. 



Male Attwater's Prairie Chicken.