

Photo by Dark Continent, Busch Gardens staff, Tampa, FL

*From a beautiful pea-green shell — A little crested tinamou named Timmy hatched recently at The Dark Continent, Busch Gardens in Tampa, Florida, from a shiny green shell unique to his species. Timmy resembles a partridge, but his nearest relatives in the bird world are the towering, ostrich-like rheas.*

## know-how and patience bird breeding at the Dark Continent

Submitted by  
The Dark Continent  
Busch Gardens, Tampa  
Tampa, Florida

Tampa, Florida—The term “lovebird” was never coined by a bird breeder. Anyone who has waited hopefully for the first fault line in that little white egg knows the breeder is the one who goes through labor in the bird world, while the parents often seem unconcerned about their productivity.

Despite the odds, the bird breeding program at The Dark Continent, Busch Gardens in Tampa, has been an unusually successful one, due largely to the efforts of the park’s curators of birds, Ed Bish and Mike Wells. Bish takes charge of the “psittacine” collection (parrots and macaws) while Wells oversees non-psittacines like flamingos and waterfowl.

Some results include the first captive U.S. hatchings of the Patagonian conure, the festive amazon and the marabou stork, among others, and the recent first captive hatching in the world of a rare, highly endangered Lear’s macaw.

“There are a lot of factors at play,” said Bish, who has worked with The Dark Continent’s bird collection since the park opened in 1959. “Birds are sensitive creatures, and sometimes hard to predict.”

One of the factors that’s hardest to predict, Bish and Wells agree, is the crucial variable of sex. Unlike most other animals, birds have internal sex organs, and even external coloring and markings won’t always differentiate males from females.

During the past three years, however, the park has employed a simple surgical procedure to distinguish the boys from the girls. Now when mated pairs don’t produce eggs, curators can narrow down the reason to one of several other logical explanations for the infertility.

Cockatoos, for example, have been difficult to breed in the past and Bish is convinced now they require more flight space

than their cages have afforded them. Larger cages may be the answer, but time will tell whether roomier accommodations make the difference for this species.

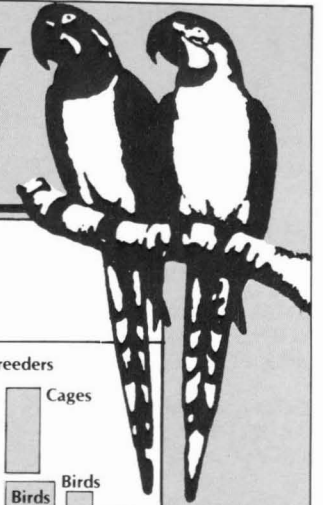
Compatibility is a factor, too, and sometimes getting a mated pair past the mating period intact is a task. Male birds have been known to viciously attack mates during breeding, or to chase the females to the point of exhaustion.

The park’s American flamingos, one of the largest captive flocks of these stately pink birds in existence, suddenly went on strike five years ago and refused to nest. To this day, Wells said, he isn’t sure what caused the hiatus, but he suspects a change in diet may have been the culprit.

“Diet is very important to breeding birds. We make sure the birds have all the nutrients they need—and the flamingos were certainly well fed. I guess their beaks got out of joint, so they just stopped

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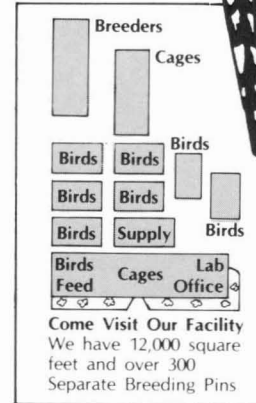
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*Ugly Duckling? Actually this tiny featherless creature is a newly hatched Lear's macaw, the first of its kind to be hatched in captivity throughout the world. The baby, which debuted recently at The Dark Continent, Busch Gardens in Tampa, is one of many rare species of birds being bred at the African-themed park.*

breeding for two years.”

It seems almost any disturbance during peak breeding season, which begins in March and lasts through most of the summer, can put potential parents out of the mood. And in a public park like The Dark Continent, it's not always easy to make sure privacy is respected.

With 249 species of birds in the animal inventory, breeding is especially touch-and-go for the 100 varieties of psittacines. “We have to take special precautions with the psittacines because they're caged,” Bish said.

“Many of the other species have clipped wings and live in natural settings—so they'll choose their own mate and nest. We have to tend to those details for the macaws and cockatoos, which live in cages.”

To date, The Dark Continent has bred 10 of its 12 varieties of macaw and more than half a dozen species of cockatoo. The non-psittacine flamingo flock has swollen in size from 12 to more than 200.

The curators estimated nearly 5,000 birds have hatched at the park since Busch Gardens opened in 1959, or about 200 per year. The figure is an impressive one—the more so when one considers the nail-biting frustration involved in the delicate breeding process.

“Mostly, it comes down to wait and see,” Bish said, philosophically. “We do our part, then keep an eye out to see if they do theirs.” Wells added, “If they don't, we change whatever needs changing.”

But with luck, and time, they usually see the results peeping out of the nest. ●

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