

# Vogelpark Walsrode

## October, 1985

by Rick Rundel  
Sonoma, California

Walsrode is a small German town located between Hanover and Hamburg. It is easily accessible by train with a change or two but the German trains are so efficient this is not a problem. If you miss your train it is o.k. as another will leave within the hour. For \$20 a night I found a very acceptable hotel in Walsrode, the Hanover Hotel, and my visit began.

Vogelpark Walsrode is one mile from town north. The entry fee is 9 marks (\$3). Once inside the park my first reaction was "now where"—it is first a park—a very relaxing atmosphere. There are not any trains, bus rides, loud speaker systems, circus colored signs and such. The few signs there are, are discreet. Your first decision relates to what kind of experience you are looking for. The path to your left leads down a lane of aviaries (grouped in such a manner as to break up a line). The path to the right meandered slowly down a hill to a small stream to the older section of the park. Both paths were quietly, invitingly lined with trees, shrubs and a few flowers.

To the stream I went, the path to the right that wandered very slowly back and forth with each turn revealing a new pond or set of aviaries quietly set into the hillside. It was a constant, pleasant experience without decision making. If birds were hiding in one aviary, the next had one right out front singing his heart out and the missing one was soon forgotten. To either side of the stream were large ponds—crystal clear with a different group of birds. The width of the path opened and closed with benches carefully placed—sometimes in groups for the family and then again sometimes singly to allow couples to sit hand in hand.

The birds were exhibited in magnificent settings, each a little different than the one before and still a little the same. "Yeah but . . ." I found myself saying, "where is the . . ." First you see, for example, a group of Chilean flamingos, common to every American zoo, then some Rubers—the big, red American

flamingo. At that point I'd think "yeah, but" what about the James Andean and lesser flamingos—dwarf collectors' birds, and sure enough, around the next corner would be a mixed flock of dwarf flamingos, and back in the corner were both African and Indian, open billed black storks, and swans. What was missing was the hype that is so common in American zoos. As I sit writing this, I am next to a back water pool—an out of the way bench next to this body of water that the main path does not go by. I chose the spot as it was quiet—a place to gather my thoughts on paper and in the past ten minutes, golden eyes have dived at my feet, eiders bathed by, a flock of Ross geese swam by—ten more kinds of water fowl are here and about. To my right are eastern storks, great white cranes and ten species of owls and an equal number of egrets and ibis and this is the quiet side of the park.

Wandering back to the entrance I now chose the second path past a group of aviaries. Each aviary is of adequate size for a variety of jays, turacos, pheasants; many of which I've never seen in my 20 years in the profession. Mound builders are birds that incubate their eggs by burying them in decaying vegetation. The brush turkey is the common bird exhibited in the U.S. but here there is no room because they have the rare species Maleo fowl—one of which I had not seen for 20 years and the other I'd never seen (Joba Maleo fowl).

Each group of aviaries was isolated and just when you'd thought you'd seen it all, you'd turn the corner and there would be ten more to observe. After 61 aviaries, one approaches an enormous flight cage, 300 ft. long by 100 ft. wide, containing flocks of crown pigeons, spoon bills, hammer-top, oropendolas, and others.

Writing the description becomes increasingly difficult as emerging from the flight cage one views a five acre lawn edged in flowers with a restaurant patio at the far end. To one corner lies

the bird of prey displays with all of the species of cassoway. At the other corner is the lory atrium with so many species ranging through all of the colors of the rainbow that it would be futile to attempt to describe it. Along one side were 100 hookbill flights—the other side, rare cranes.

Truly overwhelmed with birds to see, I dived into the cafe for a beer. My reaction now is similar to a worker overwhelmed with work; I was overwhelmed with birds to see. No matter what your specialty of interest, you will find it here. To my right are 100 aviaries of hookbills. Imperial Amazons, St. Vincent Amazons. . . As if on cue a jet fighter makes a pass over the square. It later turns out to be a common event as an air force training base is in the area. Anywhere else it would seem out of place but here it sort of just fits in.

The rest of the day I spend walking back and forth in front of the same aviaries I've seen before but each time something new comes out to perform. At 7:00 p.m. my feet can take no more. I retreat to the Paradise House, an area of tropical birds—tropical fruit pigeons, hornbills, several species of bee-eaters, humming birds. In the large walk-through flight at dusk I see birds I missed the previous six trips. Exhaustion finally sets in and I retreat to my hotel room to reflect on the day's events and to soak my tired feet. Tomorrow I shall return. Tomorrow it will be different—I will not be so overwhelmed.

Tomorrow comes and I resolved to return to the park with a critical eye. How do they make it work?

My second day explorations were equally impressive in a different way. Walsrode is a great park because they provide an excellent product. The closest American counterpart would be the style of Disneyland but in a far more simplistic way. The park is immaculately clean, the landscaping and maintenance near perfect, without the presence of people or vehicles. To one corner was an elaborate playground for energetic, bored children. Even the bathrooms were tiled and had some dignity. The aviaries were consistently well propped, clean and balanced. Every walk by seemed to add insight to a new call, a new posture, sometimes even a new bird.

The park is approximately 30 acres with about 20 acres landscaped and open to the public. The collection contains 6,000 specimens of about 500

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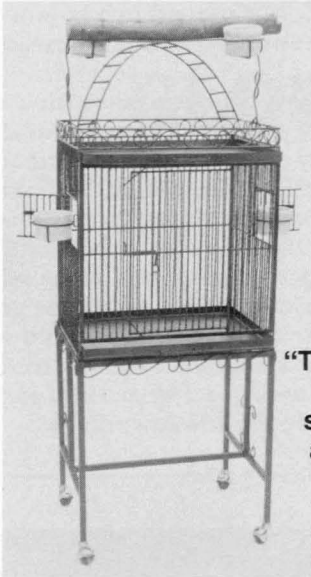
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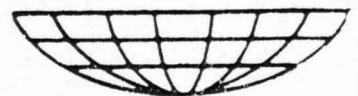
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species. A key element to its success is excellent management. A small staff—5 office workers, 16 keepers, 24 gardeners—works very efficiently. Everyone seems to know exactly what to do. Education and conservation are handled separately with specific, dramatic results. Each department is self-supporting and the park itself profitable. Even the food is quite good—simple, but two steps above McDonalds and served in a comfortable setting. The architecture is low key. The indoor aviaries are simple boxes built within standard greenhouses and magnificently landscaped. The landscaping everywhere is irregular—no rows—based around low

maintenance evergreens. Occasional park statues and fountains are the only architectural features designed to catch your eye, but placed in a balanced, tasteful setting so as not to scream at you.

The park is an endless, pleasant experience. My visit lasted four days and every day led to new experiences. The off-exhibit breeding areas, holding pens, incubation and receiving areas all were clean, well organized and simplistically efficient. For anyone wishing to be knowledgeable on the great bird parks of the world, I would suggest that a long visit to Walsrode is essential to first feel what a bird park is and then to see how it works. ●



*A DOWNY HANDFUL—An East African crowned crane chick, recently hatched at Busch Gardens, The Dark Continent, in Tampa, Florida, is now making its home in the park's popular animal nursery section. The crane will eventually be waist-high, and sport a spiky, golden crest.*

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