

AFA Visits . . .

The Playboy Mansion

by Nancy Vigran
Studio City, California

Among other beautiful and exotic creatures residing at the Playboy Mansion live numerous avian species. Located on approximately six acres in the hills of West Los Angeles, the Playboy Mansion is home to some 140 species of birds and mammals.

When Hugh Hefner moved to the property in 1971, he developed a park-like setting with an abundance of trees including California Coastal Redwoods and beautifully manicured lawns. An avian-mammal collection was started and in 1975 John Heston came to work as managing supervisor of the animal department. The first thing John did was to sit down inside of each aviary with a copy of Bates' and Busenbark's *Finches and Softbilled Birds* (one of the only "softbill encyclopedias" available at that time) to identify each species and then to determine the diets and needs of the birds.

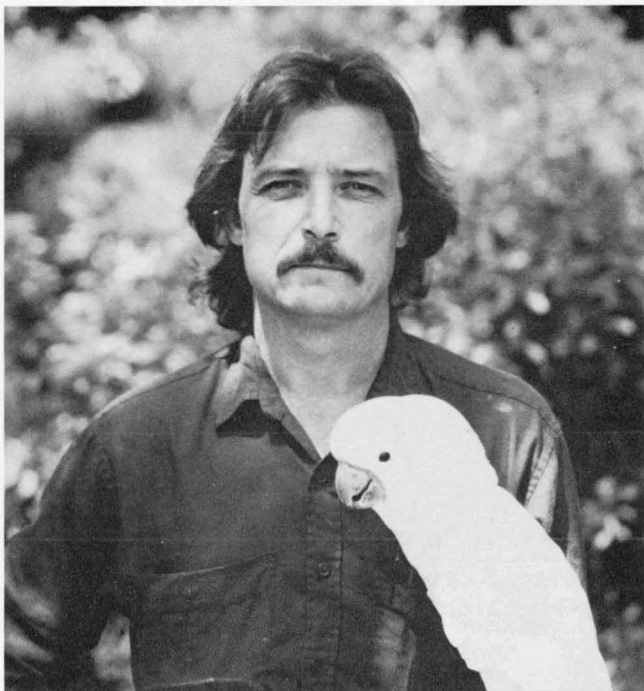
After working at the mansion for over ten years, John wanted to test the waters and diversify his life. With a Bachelors Degree in Biology and a Masters Degree in Education, he obtained a job with the Los Angeles Unified School District and has worked as a biology instructor in downtown Los Angeles for the past

four years. He currently teaches the advanced placement students and feels that this is quite a challenge. Part of John's time is now devoted to his students but part is still devoted to the animal life at the mansion. In his "free" time, John drives to

Fresno, California (where he spent his childhood) and works on the restoration of an old house.

Through the years, under the direction of Heston, the Playboy Mansion aviaries have produced numerous breeding softbills and psittacines. One family with which there has been tremendous success is the hornbills. Of the four species housed, Yellow-billed (*Tockus flavirostris*), Tarricic (*Penelopides panini*), Red-billed (*Tockus e. erythrorhynchus*) and Jackson's (*Tockus jacksoni*), young have been reared of all. The greatest successes have been with the Jackson's and Yellow-billed. Currently there is a very prolific pair of Yellow-billed set up in a large flight measuring approximately 20' x 20' x 20'. The nest box they use measures 18" h x 10" d x 15" w which is elevated about 18 feet above the ground. When nesting, the hen is enclosed in her box by her mate for

Photo by Nancy Vigran



John Heston,
managing supervisor
of the bird/animal
department
at the Hefner
"Playboy Mansion."

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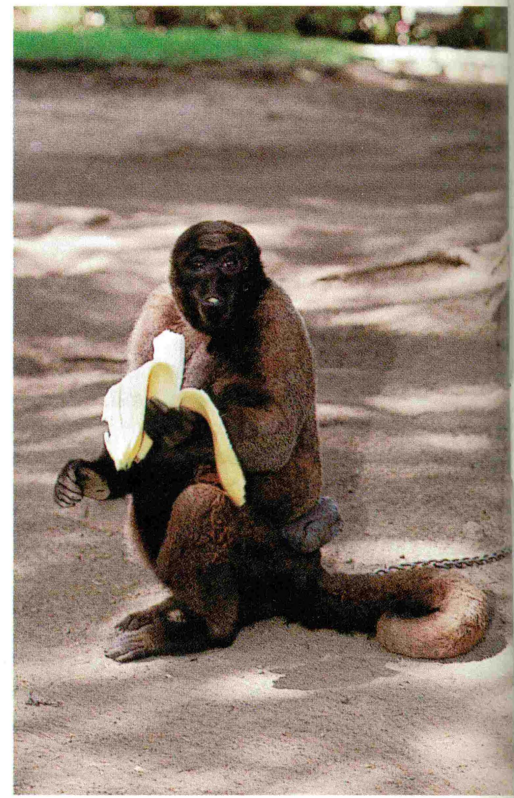
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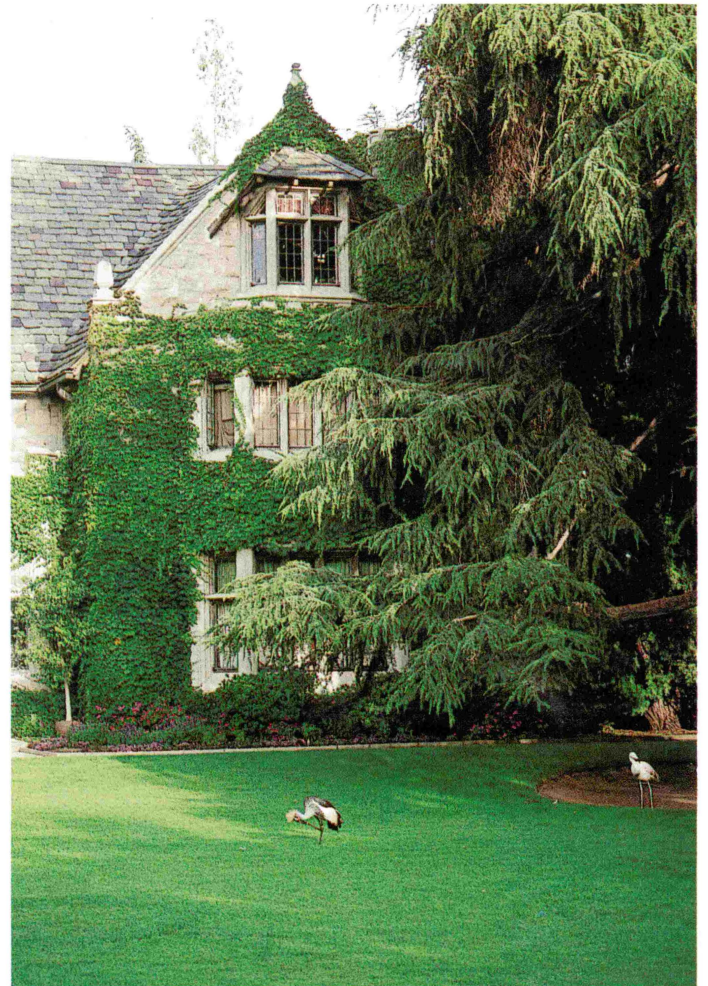
View inside Playboy Mansion's greenhouse aviaries.



Teri, the wooley monkey, has lived at the Playboy Mansion for 20 years.



View of duck and Koi ponds with the pool beyond.



View of the Hefner home and grounds with roaming Crowned Crane and flamingo.

Trio of Crowned Cranes living at the Playboy Mansion.

Photo by Nancy Vigran



There has been success with the rearing of Plush-crested Jays at the Playboy Mansion.



Photo by Nancy Vigran



Photo by John Heston

Wood and Mandarin Ducks in their usual morning free flight around the grounds.



Photo by John Heston

Two Yellow-billed Hornbill chicks just after fledging, another success story around the Playboy Mansion.

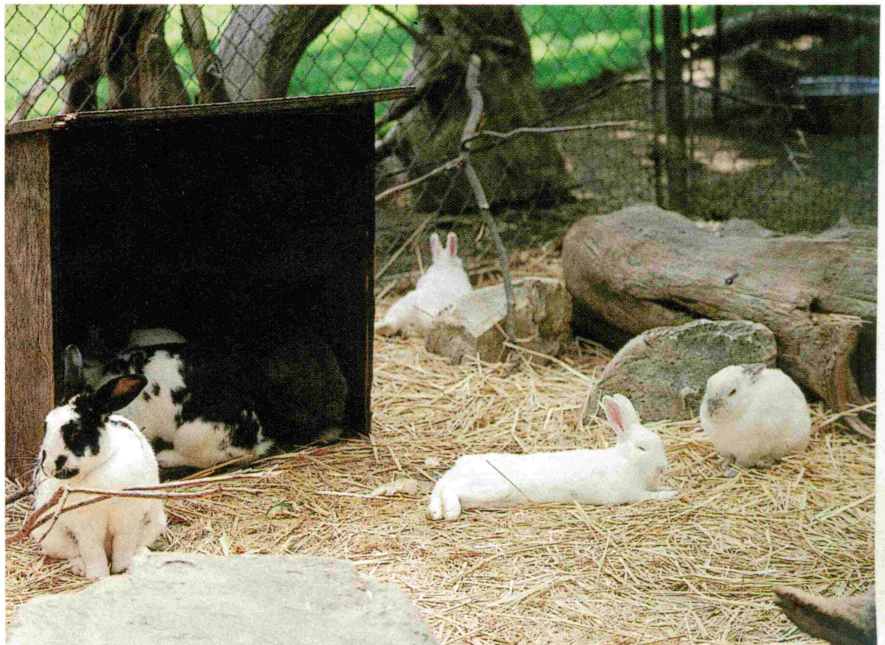


Photo by Nancy Vigran

Playboy Mansion "bunnie" enclosure.

60 to 70 days during which period she lays and incubates her eggs and rears her young until the time they are due to fledge. She then chips away the mud-closed entrance for herself and her young to emerge. During this enclosure time, the male is responsible for gathering all food and delivering it to the hen and young. If something should happen to him, the hen and young would die. This particular pair seems to produce chicks year round, just having fledged three young a few days prior to my visit. Also housed in this community flight are Nicobar Pigeons, Guinea Touracos, Silver Pheasants, Plush-crested Jays, Plantain-eaters, Crowned Pigeons and Chachalacas. For more information on experiences with rearing hornbills, please refer to two articles written by John; "Hand-rearing Southern Yellow-billed Hornbills" in the Aug/Sept 1983 issue and "Captive Breeding and Management of the Jackson's Hornbill" in the Feb/March 1989 issue of the *AFA Watchbird*.

The diet provided for most of the softbills at the mansion, including the hornbills, consists of Wayne's bite-size dog kibble, chopped fruits including papayas, bananas, melon, grapes, etc., and cooked vegetables including carrots, corn, peas and beans. Also offered is a dry food dish including again the Wayne's dog food, a small amount of trout chow, mynah pellets and raisins. Live food offered includes crickets, mealworms and goldfish.

At the Playboy Mansion there has also been great success with Guinea Touracos with over 30 young having been reared since 1980. Please refer to the Dec/Jan 1987 issue of *Watchbird* for an article by John on this species. Another more recent success is the rearing of Plush-crested Jays, not commonly accomplished in captivity.

Other avian species kept at the mansion include budgies and lovebirds to beautiful Crowned Cranes and Blue-eared Pheasants, housed in a variety of ways. The older flights are in a greenhouse building which has the appearance of a large cave. Some of the flights are actually imbedded in the walls with wire fronts attached. Housed here is a mixture of finches, canaries, weavers, budgies, doves including Bleeding Heart Doves, touracos and Magpie Jays. Also kept here are lorries, African Greys, Patagonian Conures and Amazons. Other unique features are the aquariums that have been built into the walls. Skylights were installed to provide sources of natural sunlight.

Flamingos, cranes and pheasants wander the grounds on their own accord and there is a large flock of free flight Wood and Mandarin Ducks. Over 40 of these ducks have been reared this year in forested areas that provide nesting sites. Early in the morning and at dusk many of the ducks take to the air for a flight around the mansion before settling in for the day or night. Other waterfowl kept include Pintails, Pochards and Ringed Teal.

Many of the birds are kept in pairs, often with the intent of them raising their own young. Some of the hookbills have been acquired, as often happens with zoos, from individuals who for one reason or another can no longer keep the birds as their pets. Large psittacines are turned out for the day on perches throughout the grounds. Colorful macaws and majestic cockatoos line the walkways, often begging for attention when someone comes by. The Playboy Mansion, just as any other residential home, is not removed from potential neighbor complaints of bird noise and the birds are attended to any time a ruckus starts. These daytime perched birds have evening quarters in large, communal cages within a temperature controlled environment.

Also let out during the day is Teri, a

wooley monkey, who has lived at the mansion for the past 20 years. She has a large tree with a ladder built on the trunk and all sorts of toys to play with. Teri is not the only primate at the mansion, as there is a breeding colony of squirrel monkeys as well, just adjacent to the flight containing the producing hornbills.

There is a staff of seven people in the animal department including John's assistant head keeper Debbie Abramovitch; Lisa Dunn, a licensed animal health technician, and lead keeper Ann Rosson. Each and every animal, bird and, oh yes, reptile is looked at daily and checked to assure their well being. Mrs. Hefner has taken up active involvement in the welfare of the animals as well. The staff is kept busy by predicted and unpredicted events. Predicted events include the usual daily care. The first person to work in the morning sets out on daily rounds to check for normalcy and then the breakfast preparation begins. As many aviculturists are well aware, any given day can bring numerous unpredicted events. On one particular day, a female Wood Duck hatched out her brood of eight ducklings. Her nest was on a small island set within the mansion's swimming pool (not the duck ponds)! She led her brood down to the water and they all hopped into the pool for their first swimming lesson. The real problem occurred because of the high sides of the pool as opposed to a sloping hill. The ducklings could not get out of the water. Retrieving the new hatchlings before they became exhausted and drowned was that day's unpredicted event!

Finally I do need to mention the bunnies. Yes, there is an abundance of "playboy bunnies" living on the grounds; actually, probably 50 or more. While some bunnies run free, there is a bunny enclosure measuring 40' in length by 15' wide. The enclosure has an abundance of artificial rocks for the bunnies to hop/climb with caves for sleeping in. The rest of the floor area is lined with straw and there are heat lamps along the exterior to supply ample warmth. Although well fed with pellets, grain, hay, fruits and vegetables, the bunnies keep their figures by getting much exercise hopping around. Needless to say, this enclosure and these individuals are well looked after and are of the utmost importance to the Playboy Mansion. ●

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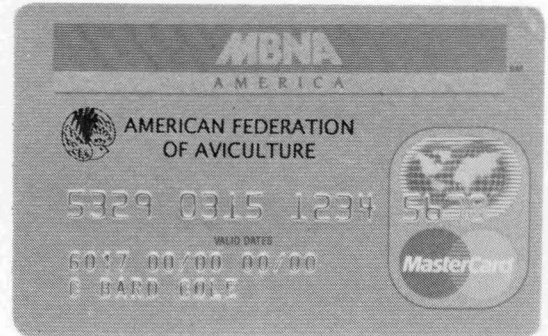
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