

HAVING BEEN AN AVICULTURIST FOR FIFTY YEARS

Part 5

by Bernard Sayers

Another Mecca for Cliff Palmer and me were the twin collections of the Ornamental Pheasant Trust and Norfolk Wildlife Park which co-existed on the same site at Great Witchingham in the North of the county. In fact we visited these collections so frequently in the 1960s that Cliff's Ford Anglia virtually knew its own way there! Round the Norwich ring road to the A 1067 Fakenham exit and about fourteen miles yonder to the village of Great Witchingham and there, on the corner of the righthand turn to Reepham, were these two wonderful collections. They were set up by Philip Wayre and his wife Pat and, in their prime, almost certainly exhibited the most comprehensive collections of pheasants and European wildlife ever opened to the public in the U.K. Philip Wayre has had a lifelong interest in natural history and whilst still at school at Sherborne practised falconry along with his school friend Gordon Jolly. Here I must apologise in advance because I am off on another ramble, because Gordon Jolly was later to play a part in thwarting some of my avicultural ambitions. In my early days of birdkeeping, large numbers of birds of prey were imported and sold very cheaply to anyone who had the money to buy them. The birds were kept and transported in deplorable conditions and often arrived in a pitiable state. Many were bought on impulse by people who had no knowledge of their proper care and the mortality rate was horrific. Clearly something had to be done to curtail this cruel traffic. The Department of the Environment, which was the precursor to DEFRA, decided to introduce a system whereby intending importers of raptors were required to obtain permits and, as a means of ensuring that the applicant possessed adequate knowledge of caring for birds of prey, membership of the greatly respected British Falconers' Club was a significant criterion. I already had a few hawks and eagles and a single king vulture, but most of my birds were either singletons or what I suspected were unisex pairs; remember this was long before surgical or DNA sexing became possible and I had to rely on observing behaviour and the size of the birds because with most birds of prey except vultures the females are significantly bigger than the males. I had already bred a few hawks in my aviaries, but I wanted to pair up my odd birds so that I could breed more. Accordingly I applied for the necessary permits to import the birds I needed for my breeding programme only to have my application refused by the D.O.E. However, an official advised me "Off the record" that any future applications would be viewed more favourably if I became a member of the B.F.C. I duly applied

for membership candidly explaining that I had no plans to take up falconry, but my interests centred solely on captive breeding. The secretary of the B.F.C. at that time was the same Gordon Jolly who had helped Philip Wayre at Sherborne and I promptly received a curt refusal to be allowed to join the Club. I was refused membership for three reasons:-

I. I was not an active falconer which was a fair point. Indeed I have always held rather ambivalent views about falconry. On the one hand I admire the superb condition of the birds flown by good falconers and am greatly impressed by the rapport between bird and man which allows a falcon to be flown at quarry and have it return to its handler. However, the downside is that I have always detested seeing birds of prey tethered and include this practice with other personal aversions such as parrots chained to stands and hobbled elephants. Happily, the latter two practices are now rarely seen in this country and I sincerely hope will be consigned to the more infamous chapters of history. Unfortunately, one still sees countless birds of prey tethered to blocks or bow perches at the many falconry establishments around the country. I suppose if the bird is flown daily for a generous period it may be viewed as acceptable, but what a tedious existence for birds to spend most of their lives on the end of a leash. Surely it would be possible in most cases to provide the birds with a good sized, carefully designed aviary for their non-flying time, or, better still, give them a more fulfilled existence by keeping them as pairs and encouraging them to breed.

II. I was proposing to keep hawks and eagles behind "wire netting" which was I gathered a heinous crime. Whilst it is true that some birds of prey such as goshawks and sparrowhawks are highly strung and skittish and may injure themselves on wire netting, most raptors can be kept and bred perfectly satisfactorily in aviaries with three enclosed sides and a wire front. In fact some pairs need less seclusion than this design offers. All of my birds, including a crested goshawk, were kept in conventional aviaries which offered the occupants a sense of security and they remained in perfect condition with no damage to their ceres or feathering.

III. I required the birds for breeding which, I was told, was simply not practicable and the fact that I had already successfully bred three species of diurnal raptors apparently accounted for nothing. So I was refused membership of the B.F.C. and this, in turn, precluded me from obtaining the permits necessary to pair up my birds. It was for these reasons that I reluctantly decided to dispose of my hawks and eagles and instead specialise in owls where I hoped I would not encounter these problems.

Well folks, after that somewhat lengthy ramble or was it a rant (!) I am now back at Great Witchingham. Philip Wayre served as a naval officer during the Second World War and after being invalided out of the service

he bought Hawks Hill Farm in Great Witchingham and started a poultry and turkey rearing business. However, in parallel, he gradually assembled a private zoo of exotic animals, travelled quite widely to study and film wildlife and undertook lectures and filmtours. Philip is ideally suited to lecturing because although quite small in stature he has a commanding presence, a rich tonal voice and perfect diction. In short he is very easy to listen to and a first class communicator. In fact I often thought that if his career path had taken a different direction he would have made an excellent television presenter/interviewer.

As added attractions at these lectures Philip was accompanied by Bubo a trained European Eagle Owl *Bubo b. bubo* and Bokhara a trained Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos*. Bubo is the scientific name for an eagle owl, but Bokhara employs a little more imagination because it is a city in Uzbekistan an area which is home to the huge race of golden eagle known in Central Asia as Birkhuts. These are almost twice the size of our Scottish birds. Indeed the Mongols have trained these huge eagles to fly at wolves and with considerable success. However, Philip's birds came from Finland and, although larger than its Scottish counterpart, it was not nearly as big a Birkhut. In 1959, following discussions with the Council of the Avicultural Society, it was decided that pheasants had become poorly represented in European collections and, with the serious threats facing many species in the wild, a captive-breeding programme needed to be inaugurated with some urgency. The focus was to be to establish strong captive populations of as many species as possible within an ultimate purpose of being able to offer stock for reintroduction programmes. It was agreed that an Ornamental Pheasant Trust be set up under the aegis of the Avicultural Society with the breeding collection to be established at Hawks Hill, Great Witchingham with Philip as Director. The Trust was formally initiated in 1961. In parallel to the formation of the O.P.T. Philip and his wife Pat had been thinking about expanding their private zoo and opening it to the public. This, in part, had been prompted by the loss of the stock of poultry and turkeys to fowl pest and the need to decide how best to employ the compensation. It was decided to establish a European Wildlife Park which would be virtually unique in the U.K. and this opened to the public in August 1962. Philip and Pat's farm at Hawks Hill consisted of a venerable old farmhouse formed by joining and extending two cottages with about fifty acres of meadowland. Surrounding the farm were extensive buildings for housing poultry and about twenty acres of reasonably flat meadow. Between this and the Reephams road, which bounded the far side of the property, was about thirty acres which formed a valley with gently sloping sides. It was decided that the thirty acre valley would become the Wildlife Park and the twenty acres of flat meadow would become the site

for the Ornamental Pheasant Trust's collection. However, the divide was not absolutely clear cut because some of the OPT's birds were housed in the Park open to the public and as the collection of European wildlife grew and more space was needed, large enclosures for wisent or European Bison *Bison bonasus*, Lynx *Felis lynx*, and Brown Bears *Ursus arctos* were erected in what had been the private area. Although the collections of the Ornamental Pheasant Trust and the Norfolk Wildlife Park were somewhat intermingled it would probably be more understandable to the reader if I dealt with them separately. Near to the entrance gate to the park with the adjacent office and restaurant there was a walk-through pheasant enclosure. This was a good-sized grassed enclosure planted with shrubs and with two shelters in areas fenced off from the public. Because of its size it was not roofed and the birds must have been wing clipped, pinioned or brailed. This enclosure contained a colourful collection of Peafowl *Pavo cristatus* and cocks only of such colourful species as Golden *Chrysolophus cristatus*, Silver *Lophura n. nycthemera*, Lady Amherst's *Chrysolophus amherstiae*, Himalayan Monal *Lophophorus impeyanus* and Blue Eared Pheasants *Crossoptilon auritum*. Although cock pheasants are highly territorial and aggressive towards other males this arrangement seemed to work quite well. I guess it worked because of the enclosure's large size, generous cover, the fact that no females were present and since it contained a large number of birds any pheasant that was being bullied quickly became lost in the crowd. Certainly this display was very popular with the public, particularly with photographers. About mid-way across the park running more or less on its central axis was a high, dense hedge. Looking across from the cafeteria, on the far side of the left-hand end of this hedge was a block of very large aviaries. These had substantial, heated shelters in the middle and were, I think, purchased from the Leckford Abbas collection of Spedan Lewis. Certainly the Leckford collection was reduced to a commercial waterfowl collection at around the same time that the Ornamental Pheasant Trust was formed and I know that Philip Wayre bought what remained of the pheasants. Being on a sunny, sloping site, backed by a sheltering hedge and with snug, heated shelters these pens were reserved for the Trust's tropical species of pheasants which are somewhat delicate. They contained Palawan Peacock Pheasants *Polyplectron napoleonis*, Vieillot's *Lophura ignita rufa* and Bornean Crested Firebacks *L. i. ignita* and both the Malayan *Argusianus a. argus* and Bornean *Argusianus a. grayi* races of the Great Argus Pheasant. This remains the only occasion I have seen the Bornean great argus and it may have been the last time this rare species was exhibited in a European collection. Many of the rare species acquired by the Trust were received from Dr. Ken Searle. Dr. Searle had a medical practice in Hong Kong and had a very keen interest

in aviculture. He mounted a special expedition to the island of Borneo to collect the Bornean Crested Firebacks and the Bornean great argus and from his contacts amongst the animal dealers of Hong Kong he obtained other birds such as Cabot's Tragopans *Tragopan caboti* and a single White Eared Pheasant *C. crossoptilon*. This was the first live White Eared Pheasant I had seen and did, of course, pre-date the two pairs later purchased by Jersey Zoo and Shep Mallet (John a.k.a Shep Mallet was curator of birds at Jersey Zoo at this time). To the best of my knowledge the Trust bird, which was I think a female, never bred because it was not possible to obtain a mate for it. Fortunately, after rather a bumpy start, the Jersey birds bred very well and were the founders of the stock we have today.

Before we move on, Dr. Ken Searle deserves more mention for the sterling work he has done for so many years. The standard practice at London Zoo was to give the origin of their animals on their cage labels. Thus it was customary to see succinct data like "born in the menagerie", "purchased", "received in exchange" and "presented by" followed, where applicable, with a name and a date. Many labels for species as diverse as orang-utans, hog badgers, ferret badgers, martens and many birds quoted the origin as "presented by Dr. K. Searle" and for several years I wondered who Dr. Searle was. Later I met Dr. Searle, albeit briefly, at a meeting of the Avicultural Society. Not only was Dr. Searle a generous benefactor to collections like London Zoo and the Ornamental Pheasant Trust he somehow also found the time to be the curator of the zoo in the Hong Kong Botanical Gardens. This zoo exhibits some mammals, but under Dr. Searle's curator ship it became better known for its excellent bird collection and its highly creditable breeding achievements. To name just three, the Mountain or Rothschild's Peacock Pheasant *Polyplectron inopinatum*, African Pigmy Goose *Nettopus auritus* and Red Bird of Paradise have, I believe, bred successfully at the Hong Kong Botanic Gardens.

The remaining block of pheasant aviaries in the Norfolk Wildlife Park were on an elevated site in the top, right hand corner of the park looking across the valley from the cafeteria. These, as with all the pheasant breeding enclosures at the O.P.T. were large, grass-floored aviaries with a central shelter. Although not planted, conifer branches laid in the corners provided cover for security or nesting. These aviaries housed hardy species such as Satyr *T. satyri* and Temminck's Tragopans *T. temminckii*, Blue Eared and Brown Eared Pheasants *C. manturicum*, Himalayan Monals, Elliot's *Syrmaticus ellioti* and Mrs Hume's Bar-tailed Pheasant *S. humiae* and common Koklass pheasants *Pucrasia macrolopha*.

The Koklass pheasant saga is quite amazing and shows the hand that fate can play. This mountain species from the Himalayas had been considered

difficult to manage in captivity because, in common with most birds from high altitudes, cold climates, or maritime environment, they do not normally encounter many of the infections encountered in mild, humid countries and so have very little natural immunity to them. Given this background, imagine Philip Wayre's amazement when he visited Palmer's Pet Stores in Camden Town and saw a recently imported pair being offered for sale. The pair appeared to be a male and a female although the latter looked to be in poor condition and there were serious doubts that she would survive. Philip immediately bought the pair and fortunately with careful nursing at Great Witchingham the female did recover and this pair went on to breed very successfully. Fred Johnson is credited with the first captive breeding of the Koklass pheasant, but it was at Great Witchingham that large numbers were bred which soundly established this interesting species in aviculture. Sadly the wheel has now almost gone full circle because very few Koklass pheasants survive in British collections today. This is not due to any undue difficulties in managing them, but is the result of declining interest in aviculture which has seen many species of pheasants (and other birds of course) reduced to perilously small populations.

I was a member of the Ornamental Pheasant Trust and for what now sounds like a trifling sum of £1.00 annual membership I could enjoy unlimited access to both the Norfolk Wildlife Park and the private section which housed most of the pheasant collection, an excellent annual report and, most important of all, first offer of any surplus stock. However, to bring this charge into perspective I should point out that as a trainee technician at the Marconi Company my salary at that time was £5.00 per week!

Here I would like to describe the incubating and rearing methods at Great Witchingham which were, to my mind, difficult to improve upon although they did demand a great deal of space and were very labour intensive. My first preference is to allow pheasants to incubate their own eggs and parent-rear the chicks. Unfortunately many pheasants are rather nervous and highly strung or live in polygamous groups which makes parent-rearing impracticable. A flock of some four hundred Silky crossed with Light Sussex bantams was maintained at Great Witchingham to do all of the incubation. Even today when there are very sophisticated and accurate incubators on the market I still favour broody bantams. At any one time during the breeding season there were around one hundred broodies incubating eggs and these were housed, under cover, in one of the long, disused poultry buildings. The broody boxes were setup in a long line on a platform constructed by building two parallel walls of breeze blocks and infilling the gap between them with earth. Thus the eggs could be set in a hollow in the earth lined with hay since the broody boxes had no bottoms. Across a gangway was

a line of wire cages again raised up to working height. This allowed an attendant to lift each bantam off the eggs on a daily basis and place it in the facing cage where it could feed and drink. Whilst the bantam was in the cage it allowed the eggs to air and it gave the attendant the opportunity to check and mist them if required. Once the eggs hatched, the chicks and broody were removed to a small coop with supplementary electric heating. After two or three weeks the poults were separated from their foster mother and moved to a larger coop, but still with additional electric heating. And finally, when feathered, the poults were moved to fold units. These fold units were known as Whitlocks after the name of the company in Great Yeldham who made them. They were about 8ft square and 4ft high and were set out on grass where they could be slid onto clean grass every few days. Each fold unit could hold up to about eight young pheasants. The young pheasants bred at Great Witchingham were invariably of superb quality. Wherever possible strong parent stock was employed and the rearing methods ensured that they had the best start. Whilst this programme was in progress the Ornamental Pheasant Trust's breeding successes made a huge contribution to aviculture and potentially to conservation. Most of the breeding stock of pheasants was kept in the private section of Great Witchingham which was probably a sensible arrangement. Pheasants will, of course, breed perfectly successfully in collections open to the public providing there is plenty of cover where the birds can seek refuge when frightened. However, pheasants are easily spooked and, knowing how uncaring a minority of visitors are, keeping much of the breeding stock undisturbed probably contributed to the excellent breeding results at Great Witchingham. The breeding pairs were housed in a row of very large, grass floored aviaries which ran the entire length of the off-show area.

Before leaving this subject, mention must be made of a great rarity which was included in the collection - a female Western Tragopan *T. melanocephalus*. The Ornamental Pheasant Trust received a pair of these very rare pheasants, but sadly the male died soon after arrival. However the female lived for several years and was kept with a male Temminck's tragopan. She laid eggs every year and I have some of them in my reference collection of captive-laid eggs, but I am unaware of any hybrid being reared. Interestingly the tragopans inhabit the suitable altitudes of the entire range of the Himalayas and, as the name suggests, the western tragopan comes from the western end of this huge area. It is also much the darkest in colour and the five species of tragopans become paler in colour as they run eastwards until the beautiful Cabot's tragopan with its muted shades of buff, cream, orange and chocolate.

What happened to the Ornamental Pheasant Trust? Well, sadly it was

relatively short lived. I am not aware of all of the reasons for its closure although I think I can guess what some were. Running any collection of animals open to the public is an enormously demanding task requiring immense energy, focus and business expertise and Philip Wayre had two to look after with the Norfolk Wildlife Park and the Ornamental Pheasant Trust. It is true they occupied the same site, but they were very different collections which undoubtedly required different management techniques. So I suspect that, in time, he found the twin tasks enormously burdensome. Also, with the formation of the World Pheasant Association, support was reduced. I well remember attending the inaugural meeting of the W.P.A. on 7th September 1975. This meeting was held in the lovely grounds of Jean and Keith Howman's home at Shepperton - on -Thames and it was the beginning of an organisation which has made an enormous contribution to the conservation and study of Galliformes. However, it was never the W.P.A's intention to maintain a comprehensive breeding collection of gamebirds although, for a time, a representative collection was on show at their headquarters at Beale Park near Reading. I viewed the two organisations as complimentary and was pleased to support both, but some members of the Ornamental Pheasant Trust moved their support to the W.P.A. and this was another factor which brought about the closure of the O.P.T. Although I accept that, given the circumstances, closure of the O.P.T. was virtually unavoidable I am still very sorry that it became necessary. Now there is no comprehensive collection of Galliformes open to the public in the U.K. Even the nice collection at Beale Park is much reduced now that the headquarters of the W.P.A. has relocated. It was always my hope that the Ornamental Pheasant Trust would follow the same progress as the Wildfowl Trust which was established by Sir Peter Scott at Slimbridge and now has centres around the country. But it wasn't to be and pheasants and the cause of conservation are the losers.

Now let us turn to the Norfolk Wildlife Park. Although Pat and Philip Wayre had decided to concentrate on the European fauna when the Park first opened it contained a number of exhibits from their private collection which didn't fit this theme. For instance there was a nice breeding herd of Barbary wild sheep, on a fallen tree trunk lived liberty pairs of Scarlet *Ara Macao* and Blue and Gold Macaws *Ara ararauna*, and there were Rheas *Rhea americana* and a binturong *Arctictis binturong*. Also, a very popular occupant of the Park was Pooh a Malayan Sun Bear *Helarctos malayanus*. Pooh was bought as a cub from Palmer's Pet stores in Camden Town and reared by Pat and Philip Wayre. He had a particularly close bond with Pat. As his enclosure was on the edge of the Park with a wire tunnel into the private area. Pat regularly took Pooh for walks with the family dogs until he displayed the temperament for which bears are notorious. One day, whilst

out for their walk. Pat tried to coax Pooh to stay with the group when he turned on her and badly mauled one of her legs.

Oh, dear folks, here comes another digression! My wife is Thai and during our visits to Thailand we have made many friends who have private zoos or who work in public collections. The Thai keepers form very close bonds with their charges and go in with almost everything. When visiting these collections it is quite common for guests to be invited by the keepers to go into the enclosures to meet their animals. During these visits I have been taken into enclosures to meet full grown tigers, leopards, crocodiles, magnificent bull elephants and other potentially dangerous animals. However, courage failed me (or was it good sense prevailed) when I was invited to go into a large, grassed enclosure with seven adult Asian black bears. I rather upset their keeper who pointed out that I had already been taken in with several of his colleague's charges and I certainly had no wish to cause offence, but I viewed the meeting as being too risky. The big cats are certainly dangerous, but they are reasonably demonstrative and give warning signs that they are becoming annoyed and it is time to leave them alone. However, bears are entirely inscrutable and give little or no warning of mood changes. Their moods can change in a split second and, given their formidable teeth and claws and their immense strength, you have some idea of why I did my impersonation of a chicken. Further, with seven animals present, these risks were multiplied sevenfold. But maybe I should attribute my refusal to enter the bears' enclosure to my disability - I was born with a yellow streak down my back!

This exotic stock was quickly phased out and thereafter the Norfolk Wildlife Park concentrated on European fauna. All of the enclosures were large and were landscaped and planted to resemble the occupants' habitat as closely as possible. Where practicable on the public side, ha - has (dry ditches) were used as boundaries, but where the more agile animals needed to be totally enclosed wire and rustic pole structures were erected. There were none of the old fashioned heavily barred, concrete floored enclosures and every attempt was made to keep the enclosures harmonious with the landscape.

Turning to the left from the entrance was a crescent of large paddocks for the deer. The first contained a group of reindeer *Rangifer tarandus* obtained from the herd established at semi-liberty in the Cairngorms. Although reindeer were part of the British fauna, they became extinct long ago. In fact there is considerable debate as to exactly how long ago, but the most recent estimate suggests thereabouts a thousand years ago. The Cairngorm herd was established by Mikel Utsi when he imported eight Swedish mountain reindeer in April 1952 followed by additional animals in later years. I have

never had the pleasure of visiting the Cairngorms, but I did meet Mr and Mrs Utsi because they maintained a home at Harston near Cambridge which is not too far from my own home. The Utsis looked a somewhat incongruous couple and were two of the great characters of the zoo scene in the U.K. Mikel was a short, stocky man with a mischievous sense of humour. He was born into a reindeer herding Sami family and he would sometimes wear his brightly coloured traditional dress. His wife Dr Ethel Lindgren was from a Swedish - American family and I believe was brought up in America. She had a prodigious intellect and is said to have been fluent in English, Swedish, French, German, Russian, Dutch, Mongol and Tungu. She had studied psychology and anthropology at Cambridge University and seemed to have knowledge of and views on almost any subject one cared to mention. She was a huge woman and with her immense charisma and entertaining conversation she dominated any gathering. If this were not enough she was notorious for her trademark wolf-skin coat which she rarely seemed to be without. Undoubtedly it was warm, but it was accompanied by a pungent, gamey bouquet which suggested that the previous occupant had not long dispensed with it - and was none too scrupulous about personal hygiene! Mikel died in 1979 and Dr Ethel Lindgren in 1988. However, they left a legacy of a well-established herd of reindeer in the Cairngorms which has provided stock to many zoos and wildlife parks. The Cairngorm herd of reindeer is still thriving and was taken over by Tilly and Alan Smith after the death of the Utsis.

Great Witchingham exhibited, and indeed bred, all of the European deer with the notable exception of the elk (called moose in North America). There was undoubtedly some good reason for this absence. Elk are huge animals, indeed by far the largest of the world's deer, with bulls measuring about 6ft at the shoulder and weighing half a ton. The American form, the moose, is even larger with particularly fine bulls measuring 7ft 6in at the shoulder and weighing over three quarters of a ton. The antlers vary by a similar ratio spanning about 4ft in European animals whereas a spread of 6ft is not that uncommon in Alaskan specimens. Not only are elk rather difficult to maintain in captivity, but the bulls become incredibly dangerous during the rut. In fact many years ago I was staying with a friend who worked at Neumunster Zoo in the north of Germany, which also specialises in European fauna, when the bull elk attacked and almost killed its keeper. These characteristics have resulted in very few elk being exhibited in British collections. In fact I can only recall two occasions. Long ago I remember seeing a family group at Whipsnade and this collection is now breeding them again, and currently there are some in the Highland Wildlife Park.

Sometime ago a keeper working with ungulates at London Zoo good

naturedly chided me for making a hash of naming the males and females of different species of deer. I think the elk/moose is the only species called a bull and cow although I have heard reindeer sometimes referred thus. Roe deer and fallow deer are referred to as bucks and does whereas red deer are known as stags and hinds. Confused? Well I am not surprised and just to confuse readers further young elk/moose and red deer are known as calves, young roe deer are kids and the correct appellation for young fallow deer is fawn. There seems to be a great deal in favour of concentrating on birds!

The species of deer at Great Witchingham were red, fallow, roe, muntjac and Chinese water deer. It is only the red and roe deer which are indigenous to Britain. The fallow deer was probably introduced by the Normans although some authorities suggest the introduction took place much earlier by the Romans. This species was specifically introduced for sport. The introduction of Sika, Muntjac *Muntiacus reevesi* and Chinese Water Deer *Hydropotes inermis* occurred accidentally when animals escaped from the deer park at Woburn around a century ago. The last paddock in this corner of Great Witchingham contained a huge pile of rocks and was home to a breeding group of Alpine Ibex *Capra ibex*; the only one I remember seeing in this country. Then came an enclosure for Wild Boar *Sus scrofa* and the roof of the boar's concrete shelter provided a vantage point to look over a conifer plantation which contained a pair of Iberian Wolves *Canis lupus*. Again these were the first examples of this southern sub-species of the grey wolf I remember seeing in this country, although there is now a pack at Port Lympne Wild Animal Park. They are smaller and of lighter build than the northern animals.

Dotted around the sloping grassland in front of the deer paddocks were numerous interesting exhibits. These included two walk-through aviaries. One was a large lofty structure built over fair-sized trees. In fact initially the builders failed to take into account the huge weight of the structure and it collapsed when almost complete. However, it was rebuilt with steel roof trusses and all was well. At one end of this aviary was a high cliff of natural stone down which tumbled a waterfall. This water fed a stream and chain of pools and was then recirculated to the top of the cliff. A path meandered through this enclosure and visitors were able to stand quietly and wait for the resident birds to show themselves. This aviary contained a nice breeding flock of Black-crowned Night Herons *Nycticorax nycticorax* which invariably had nests in the tops of the trees during summer. A flock of Alpine Choughs *Pyrrhocorax graculus* showed their approval of this aviary by breeding on ledges on the artificial cliff - a first breeding for the Norfolk Wildlife Park in 1970. Whereas our resident Red-billed Chough *P. pyrrhocorax* has a down curved red bill, in the Alpine species the bill

is short, straight and yellow in colour. There was also a very successful breeding flock of Azure-winged Magpies *Cyanopica cyanus*. This attractive corvid has a quite exceptional discontinuous geographic distribution. One population, with a diagnostic white tip to their tails, is found in Spain and the other population occurs in Mongolia, China and Japan and nowhere else in the many thousands of miles between these two areas. The other walk-through aviary was much smaller and, from memory, I would guess it was about 50ft x 25ft. This had a path along the middle and both sides were planted with indigenous shrubs. It was stocked with our native Passerines, mainly finches and buntings.

Dotted around this side of the valley were numerous, large planted aviary type structures constructed from wire on a framework of rustic poles. These contained several species of owls (Ural *Strix uralensis*, Tengmalm's *Aegolius f. funereus*, Long-eared *Asio otus*, Little *Athene noctua*, Tawny *S. aluco* etc) and a number of the smaller mammals such as Red Squirrels *Sciurus vulgaris*, Pine Martin *Martes martes* and Scottish Wildcats *Felis silvestris*. There were moated enclosures for Raccoon Dogs *Nyctereutes procyonoides* (the only species of dog to hibernate) and Arctic Foxes *Vulpes lagopus* and large pools for Grey Seals *Halichoerus grypus* and Beavers *Castor fiber*. The beavers were particularly imaginatively exhibited since visitors could enter a dark chamber which looked onto a glass-sided beavers' lodge which was dimly illuminated. Elsewhere in the park badgers were exhibited in a similar way with a dimly lit sett opening onto a dark shelter where the visitors could watch them.

Along the bottom of the valley a series of dams created a chain of seven lakes which were fed by a well-bore. These were stocked with a flock of Greater Flamingos *Phoenicopterus ruber*, Common Cranes *Grus grus* and many species of European ducks, geese and swans. To me, the most interesting enclosure was the one for waders. Sand and shingle was sculpted around the pool to mimic sand dunes and the effect had been enhanced by plantings of sea-lyme grass, sea buckthorn and brooms whilst sea shells and seaweed were scattered around. In addition to Wigeon *Anas penelope* and Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna* this enclosure contained groups of Oystercatchers *Haematopus ostralegus*, Common Curlews *Numenius arquata*, Stone Curlews *Burhinus oedienemus*, Godwits *Limosa lapponica*, Green Plovers *Vanellus vanellus* and Redshanks *Tringa totanus*. Not only was this enclosure a wonderful spectacle it proved highly successful in that most of the occupants bred successfully. Many of these successes were recognised as first captive breedings in the U.K. These included curlew and oystercatcher in 1964, green plover in 1968 and stone curlew in 1969.

Walking around the other side of the valley there was a paddock for

mouflon *Ovis orientalis*, a wild sheep from Corsica and Sardinia and a large paddock for a breeding herd of European Bison or Wisent. Other, large grass-floored enclosures housed European Lynx and European Brown Bears. Other smaller enclosures housed Red Foxes *Vulpes vulpes*, Coypus *Myocastor coypus*, Alpine Marmots *Marmota marmota*, Polecats *Mustela putorius* and a very imposing pair of Wolverines *Gulo gulo*. The Wolverine is largest of the Mustelids and is related to polecats, weasels *Mustela nivalis* and stoats *M. erminea*. It is an immensely powerful animal capable of killing prey much larger than itself - in fact picture a polecat ferret the size of a large dog and this would give some impression of the wolverine. Living as it does in the inhospitable, bitterly cold Northern parts of Canada, Alaska, Scandinavia and the U.S.S.R. it has adapted to living in harsh environments. This includes being able to gulp down enormous quantities of meat when it makes a kill and it does so very quickly to guard against losing its prey to larger predators like bears. Thus the alternative name for the wolverine, which is glutton, has now entered our language to describe a greedy person.

Large aviaries towards the top of the slope housed pairs of White-tailed Sea Eagles *Haliaeetus albicilla*, Booted Eagles *H. pennatus*, Snowy Nyctea (*Bubo*) *scandiaca* and European Eagle Owls. Great Witchingham for many years sent its park-bred young eagle owls to Sweden for a reintroduction programme which proved very successful. The other exhibit I can recall in this section of the park was a breeding troupe of Barbary Macaques *Macaca sylvanus*. The main range of this monkey is the Atlas Mountains where it lives in coniferous woodland which is snow covered in winter. It just qualifies as a European species because it is the so called ape of the Rock of Gibraltar, albeit there is considerable argument whether this monkey occurs there naturally or was introduced by man. Either way Barbary Macaques are now inseparable from the Rock of Gibraltar as are Ravens *Corvus corax* from the Tower of London.

I have purposely left mention of one exhibit until last - otters. The park had a nice otter enclosure from the beginning and the otters started to breed, something no other collection had achieved in the 20th century. Philip Wayre was one of the first to realise that the wild otter was in serious trouble in Britain through a combination of persecution (otter hunting was still permitted), habitat destruction and pollution. He decided something must be done and urgently. To orchestrate protecting or recreating suitable habitat and captive-breeding otters to provide stock for a release scheme he decided that he would form an Otter Trust. Initially he bought a suitable site in the Tamar Valley on the border of Devon and Cornwall. Here it was planned to establish a specialist collection of otters together with a park for Asian wildlife. This was before Ken Sims opened his Asian Wildlife Park at

Thrigby Hall, near Great Yarmouth. Plans were well advanced when some local people started a campaign to ensure that planning consent would not be granted and the local council bowed to this pressure. I must admit that I find it extremely tiresome that so many people lack the energy, initiative and vision to do anything worthwhile themselves yet seem perfectly prepared to expend endless effort in thwarting the plans of others. But there, I do plead guilty to being a grumpy old man!

Whilst plans for an Asian collection were in hand a number of suitable animals were acquired as they became available and these were housed pro tem at Great Witchingham. Prominent in my memory is a wonderful pair of Temminck's Golden Cats *Felis temmincki*, the last examples of this beautiful cat I recall seeing in Britain. The Temminck's golden cat comes from South East Asia and is very rare in European collections although I have seen many examples in Thai zoos. It has a large range and seems to vary considerably in size. Some are almost the size of pumas whilst others are much smaller. My memory is that the pair kept at Great Witchingham were large animals.

After the failure of this West Country venture Jeanne and Philip Wayre bought a site at Earsham near Bungay on the borders of Suffolk and Norfolk and established the Otter Trust. Although the main focus was on breeding the European Otter *Lutra lutra* to produce stock for restocking restored habitat Oriental Small-clawed Otters *Amblonyx cinerus* and Canadian Otters *L. canadensis* were also kept and bred at Earsham. I also saw an African Spotted-necked Otter *L. maculicollis* at the Trust, the only one I have seen in the U.K. To the best of my recollection this was a singleton and therefore this species is yet to be bred in this country. Although a few birds such as ducks, geese, night herons and European eagle owls along with some deer were kept at Earsham to add interest and variety to the collection the plan to combine the otter trust with an Asian Wildlife Park was abandoned.

I have tried to briefly describe the collection on show to the public, but behind the scenes were many more animals. These tended to be species difficult to display to the public like stoats, weasels, Brown Hares *Lepus europus* etc. or birds which needed an undisturbed environment to breed, particularly the smaller softbills. A number of very large, heavily planted aviaries were built in the private area at Great Witchingham and several interesting breedings were reported including the first captive breeding of the Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe* in this country in 1965.

Great Witchingham was incredibly successful in establishing regular breeding groups of many birds and mammal species and much of this success must be attributed to the skill and dedication of the Park Manager, Roy Grout. Roy, like so many skilled stockmen always appeared quiet and

unassuming when one visited the Park, but his knowledge and ability quickly became apparent and he was generous in sharing his fund of information. But this would only be offered if asked for: Roy would never offer gratuitous advice. Roy provided me with a great deal of help and advice and I owe him a considerable debt of gratitude.

And what has become of the Norfolk Wildlife Park? Well sadly it is now only a memory. At its peak this collection attracted over a quarter of a million visitors each year which adequately covered the huge running costs. However, by the 1980s most zoos recorded downturns in attendance and I would guess that Philip Wayre and his wife, as they got older, found running two collections at Great Witchingham and Earsham increasingly arduous. Eventually the Norfolk Wildlife Park was taken over by new management allowing the Wayres to concentrate on running the Otter Trust. So sadly the Ornamental Pheasant Trust and the fabulous collection of European fauna at Great Witchingham are now collections of the past and I regard myself as incredibly fortunate to have known them from beginning to end.

The Otter Trust at Earsham has now also been closed. However, this is because of the great success of the venture. The Otter has made an excellent comeback and most suitable habitat is now occupied. Even where this has not occurred it is reasoned that otter populations are now so healthy that natural dispersal will achieve expansion of distribution without releasing more captive bred animals. Also, at their ages (Philip is 90 years old), the Wayres richly deserve a more relaxed lifestyle. After all, during very full lives they have contributed so much to conservation.

Although the Wayres no longer keep livestock, they have a little house in Barnard Castle where they can stay during their regular visits. This is close to their estate of a thousand acres of fell in the north-east Pennines on the borders of Durham and Northumberland. This estate is populated by breeding Curlew, Redshank, Golden Plover, Snipe, Lapwing and a good mix of other species. This has great value as a conservation area and gives the Wayres considerable pleasure bird-watching.

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BREEDING THE CAPE ROBIN-CHAT *Cossypha caffra*

by Llŷr Davies

Natural history

The Cape Robin-chat is a small passerine belonging to the Old World flycatcher family Muscicapidae. It is evaluated as Least Concern, being described as common and widespread, having an extremely large range of over 1.6 million km². It is mainly a resident breeder in 15 southern and eastern African countries, ranging from South Sudan to South Africa. Suitable habitats include forest, grassland, savanna, scrubland as well as artificial areas, where it forages omnivorously around at ground level, primarily for invertebrates. A cup-shaped nest of coarse vegetation, lined with finer material is built by the pair.



Cape Robin-chat sitting on eggs.

Description

Adults are grey, with black cheeks separated from the crown by a white supercilium. Orange extends from the chin to the breast and from the rump and under-tail coverts to the outer tail feathers, the central tail feathers being greyish-brown. Juveniles are speckled with buff on dark brown upperparts and grey-brown on buff below.

Breeding

Waddesdon Manor Aviary acquired three unsexed birds in April 2009, which were later DNA sexed as males. A juvenile female was acquired in August the following year. A pair was made up from these birds in



Sayers, Bernard. 2013. "Having Been An Aviculturist For Fifty Years: Part 5." *The Avicultural magazine* 119(3), 98–113.

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