

## THE AVICULTURAL SOCIETY TRIP TO THE CZECH REPUBLIC

by Laura Gardner and Geoff Masson

On September 14th a group of Avicultural Society members flew to Prague for a four day trip to visit three zoos in the Czech Republic. Having travelled out on the Friday, we arrived safe and sound at the Diplomat Hotel, a four-star hotel on the outskirts of Prague. There we met Daan and Henk Witlox, two of our members who had driven down from the Netherlands. We all enjoyed the delicious buffet that was waiting for us and then retired to our rooms.



**Curator of Birds Antonin Vaidl gave the group a short introduction to the history of Prague Zoo.**

On the Saturday we travelled by coach to Prague Zoo, where we were met and escorted around the zoo by Curator of Birds Antonin Vaidl. Antonin began the tour by giving us a short introduction to the history of Prague Zoo, including details of the dramatic flood in 2002 when, within a matter of a few hours, the zoo was inundated by over 10m (30ft) of water and mud. A thousand animals had to be evacuated either to higher ground or to other zoos in the Czech Republic. Unfortunately, not all of the animals could be saved and a number either died or had to be put down, as there was no way of saving them. Casualties included a Lowland Gorilla *Gorilla gorilla*, an Asiatic Elephant *Elephas maximus*, two Hippopotamus *Hippopotamus amphibius*, 30 Waldrapp Ibis *Geronticus eremita* and nine African Spoonbills *Platalea alba*, including two which had been the oldest living birds of this species in captivity.

Antonin's knowledge of the 276 bird species maintained at Prague

Zoo was impressive and it was a delight to see so many species breeding successfully. The zoo has had the foresight to develop excellent off-show bird enclosures which were shown to us by Antonin. A highlight was seeing 20 species of laughingthrushes and to learn that 29 pairs are breeding successfully. Antonin explained that when pairs fail to rear their own young, other species such as liocichlas are often used as foster parents, which is a practise which is working extremely well at Prague Zoo. We were also thrilled to see Palm Cockatoos *Probosciger aterrimus* and Lear's Macaws *Anodorhynchus leari*. Another highlight was seeing two pairs of Shoebills *Balaeniceps rex*. One pair is housed in a state-of-the-art planted enclosure with a mesh divider on rollers so that, if need be, the two birds can be separated from one another.

Smaller passerines are well represented by several species of starlings along with a number of different bulbuls. It was a pleasure to see Coledo *Sarcops calvus*, Javan Hill Mynahs *Gracula religiosa intermedia* and what used to be called Dumont's Grackle or Mynah *Mino dumontii*, all breeding well in nicely planted aviaries.

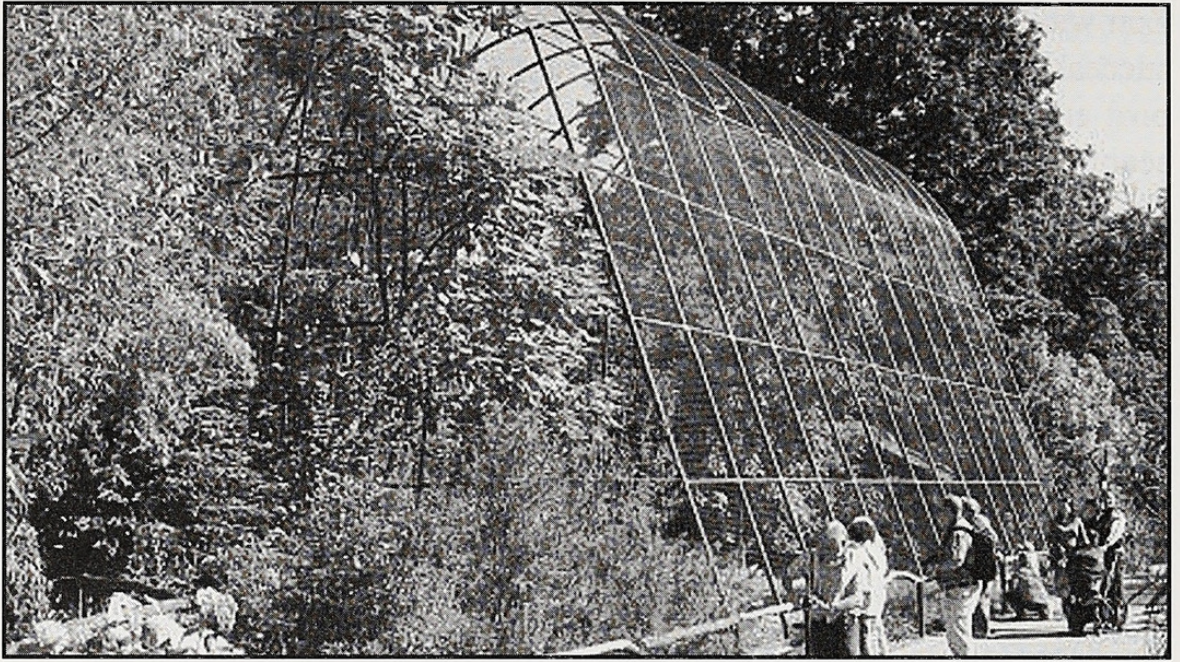
Another memorable exhibit was the enormous walk-through bird of prey enclosure which is built onto a section of rock face. Species include the Bearded Vulture or Lammergeier *Gypaetus barbatus*, Steller's Sea Eagle *Haliaeetus pelagicus*, Bald Eagle *H. leucocephalus*, Bateleur *Terathopius ecaudatus* and Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus*.

The natural rock outcrop onto which the zoo is built provides excellent habitat for mountain ungulates such as Ibex *Capra ibex* and Barbary Sheep *Ammotragus lervia*. The top of the rock face is accessible by cable car and those brave enough to take the trip enjoyed fantastic views.

The tour took us through a number of fascinating exhibits including a tropical house for Chinese birds, an Indonesian jungle, wetland areas, lemur islands and along a parrot trail. Antonin concluded the tour by kindly giving each of us a beautiful poster showing all the laughingthrushes kept at Prague Zoo. We had a wonderful day and would like to thank Antonin for devoting so much time and attention to us.

It was a short journey back to our hotel where we enjoyed a lovely meal in the restaurant and a few drinks in the bar. Some of the more adventurous members of the group went off to visit some of the bars in Prague and enjoy the beauty of the old town with its amazing architecture.

On Sunday morning we left bright and early for the zoological and botanical gardens at Plzen (Pilsen), where we were met by Curator of Birds Tomáš Peš, who escorted us around the zoo which is celebrating its 85th Anniversary. The collection has some 1,300 animals and 9,100 plant species. The zoo is divided into six biogeographical zones - Australian, Neotropical,



**A large mixed species aviary at Plzen Zoo.**

Palaearctic, Oriental, Ethiopian and Nearctic.

Again we were treated to a guided tour of the bird exhibits along with some of the other more unusual attractions such as DinoPark - an expedition back into the Mesozoic era - we saw the enormous amphitheatre in which flying displays are held and a unique, well-preserved war-time shelter beneath the Japanese Garden. As Tomáš was showing us around he told us about the conservation projects which the zoo supports, such as the Cikananga Wild Animal Rescue Centre on the Indonesian island of Java, where rare endemic species are bred for release into the wild. It also supports projects in the Philippines, Madagascar and the Corncrake *Crex crex* project in the Czech Republic.

We were very privileged to be taken behind the scenes to see the bird breeding centre. This is a very intensive set up comprising many metal cages approximately 4ft x 2ft (1.2m x 0.6m) housing breeding pairs of species such as the Pink Pigeon *Nesoenas mayeri*, Bearded Barbet *Lybius dubius*, Vasa Parrot *Coracopsis vasa*, Guira Cuckoo *Guira guira*, Australian finches, mynahs, the Purple Glossy Starling *Lamprolornis purpureus*, Asian Glossy Starling *Aplonis panayensis*, peacock-pheasants and several species of weavers. The centre is staffed by a dedicated team of keepers and has a very high rate of breeding success. We would like to sincerely thank Tomáš for giving us so much of his time and for sharing with us his expertise.

After checking out of our hotel on the final day, we travelled a couple of hours by coach to visit the zoo and safari park at Dvůr Králové, which houses some 2,000 animals of some 300 different species. We were met by Michal Podhrazský, who took the group around the safari park in a special

open-sided electric bus. We saw many species of hoofstock including oryx, reedbuck, lechwe and wildebeest or gnu. The birds (in common with the hoofstock) are housed in very large paddocks. Our President, Christopher Marler, was especially delighted to see Great White *Pelecanus onocrotalus*, Dalmatian *P. crispus*, Pink-backed *P. rufscens* and Spot-billed Pelicans *P. philippensis*. We also saw White Storks *Ciconia ciconia*, East African Grey Crowned Cranes *Balearica regulorum gibbericeps* and Marabou *Leptoptilos crumeniferus*, as well as three species of rhino, three species of zebra and two kinds of giraffe.

Having completed the safari we returned to the zoological gardens where we were free to walk around the collection at our leisure. The highlight was a large walk-through aviary housing spoonbills, waterfowl, laughingthrushes, Avocets *Recurvirostris avosetta* and Scarlet Ibis *Eudocimus ruber*. The zoo also has a large group of Greater Flamingos *Phoenicopterus roseus* and a smaller group of Pink-backed Pelicans.

After a spot of lunch in the restaurant the group departed for the airport.

The trip was a huge success - as have been all our previous trips to Europe - and we would like to express our thanks to Mike Curzon, who with the help of Karli Lisiecki at Howard Travel, made all the arrangements and ensured that everyone had a great time and returned home safely.

## VULNERABLE IN VICTORIA

There may be fewer than 1,000 breeding pairs of Leadbeater's or Major Mitchell's Cockatoos *Lophocroa leadbeateri* left in the Australian state of Victoria, the number of breeding pairs having declined by 65% in the past 15 years. In October, a survey in Wyperfeld National Park in Victoria's semi-arid north-west, counted just 17 breeding pairs compared with 63 pairs in 1995, according to a report in *The Sydney Morning Herald*.

New research shows that this cockatoo is particular about finding the right nest site - opting for a hollow in a native *Callitris* (Cypress Pine) which is about 100 years old and in excess of 75m (250ft) tall. Moreover, the hollow has to be about 0.5m (1ft 8in) deep - pairs do not like it to be any deeper and do not seem to like it any shallower, according to Victor Hurley, a Biodiversity Officer with the Victorian Department of Sustainability and Environment, who travels around with a chisel enlarging hollows which are too small and sometimes evicting feral bees and other creatures from suitable hollows.

## THE SOCIETY'S VISIT TO THE OVERBROOK HOUSE COLLECTION

by Philip Schofield

Flamingo Gardens & Zoological Park in the Buckinghamshire village of Weston Underwood, was open to the public from 1968-2001. Nowadays, the owner, Christopher Marler, maintains an impressive private collection at his nearby home, Overbrook House. Elected President of the Avicultural Society, following the death of Raymond Sawyer, Christopher hosted this year's September, Autumn Social Meeting, which was attended by over 50 members and guests.

The original Flamingo Gardens held all six forms of flamingo and comprehensive crane and stork collections, as well as such unusual avicultural subjects as Lammergeier *Gypaetus barbatus* and Guanay Cormorant *Phalacrocorax bougainvillii*. The current collection is smaller, but equally fascinating. While mammals may seem out of place in an avicultural journal, I feel I cannot ignore them as they are so important and integral to Christopher's collection and way of life.

Leaving aside the whippets which greeted us on arrival and the white wallabies which are, thanks largely to Christopher, now a relatively common sight, there is a fine group of Llamas and six kinds of cattle on view. Christopher has a lifetime's experience of breeding Shorthorn Cattle and has judged them all over the world. His small herd seems to be gradually turning white, not because of old age, but because of their owner's penchant for white animals. There are also white Yaks, three cows and a piebald calf, awaiting a new bull, which is proving difficult to find in the UK. The nearest to wild cattle living in the current collection is the trio of Gayal, the domesticated form of the Gaur *Bos gaurus*. Smaller than their wild ancestors, they have wide spreading horns rather than the curved headgear of the original species. Christopher's pair of Ankole Cattle also show impressive horn development. Once a common sight in zoos, they are currently out of favour here in the UK. The two appeared quite athletic for cattle and trotted around with their heads held high at the sight of a small flock of aviculturists. Also lively, but keeping their distance, were three Hungarian Steppe Cattle, an ancient breed which is grey in colour and has lyrate horns. Christopher was hopeful that one or both of the heifers were in calf. More approachable was the herd of Dwarf Zebu, with the bull pawing the ground and tossing his head at us. According to one breeder of these miniature Indian humped cattle, they make engaging pets and there is a big demand for young calves of both sexes. The last ungulates we met were three female Himalayan Long-eared Goats - the

male who was shut away as perhaps overly friendly, shows a spiral twist to his horns, suggestive of Markhor *Capra falconeri* connections in his distant ancestry. The white Fallow Deer *Cervus dama* are in a distant part of the estate and were not included in our tour.

Christopher has had a long involvement with domestic birds, particularly geese. Grazing around the entrance to the property were 50 or more assorted geese, many of them hatched during 2012. Most numerous were the supremely elegant white Chinese Geese, with Frankish (also called Franconian) Geese (true-breeding blue and a recent UK import from continental Europe), Pomeranian and English Greyback Geese with, for waterfowl enthusiasts, both Atlantic *Branta c. canadensis* and giant Canada Geese *B. c. maxima*. The Atlantic Canada Goose, which is now so abundant as a feral bird in the UK, is a big bird but nowhere near as big as the giant Canada Goose. Other domestic birds include some 30 varieties of pigeons, including elegant Brunner Pouters in red, yellow and dun, as well as my favourite Arcangels. Various breeds have been tried at liberty, but predation by Sparrowhawks *Accipiter nisus* has been a problem. We saw free-flying Voorberg Croppers, which being relatively sedentary, do not attract the hawk's attention in the same way as habitually high flying breeds of pigeon. We also saw some very good Sebrights - examples of both Golden and Silver of this 'hen-feathered' breed - and Golden Duckwing Rosecomb Bantams.

Of Christopher's non-domestic or 'wild' species of birds, his pride and joy are his four species of pelicans. The six Great White *Pelecanus onocrotalus* were in the early stages of nesting this year, when a change in the weather put them off and they did not lay. However, they are in magnificent condition and will, hopefully, try again next year. Their plumage was decidedly pink, which Christopher attributes to their diet of freshwater fish, rather than the pelagic species which are often fed to pelicans elsewhere. Housed away from the Great White Pelicans is a mixed group of other pelicans, consisting of a pair of Pink-backed *P. rufescens* (wing-clipped at present but possibly to be moved into an aviary in the future and kept full-winged in the hope that the pair will breed), a single Chilean *P. thagus* (said to be the least hardy of the pelicans) and a pair of Australian Pelicans *P. conspicillatus*.

The collection may be about to break the accepted dogma that small groups of flamingos do not breed: two pairs of Lesser Flamingos *Phoenicopterus minor* laid in an aviary less than 20ft x 20ft (approx. 6m x 6m) with a tiny pond, but were prevented from breeding successfully by the presence of a pair of Blacksmith Plovers *Vanellus armatus*, which has now been moved to a much larger aviary housing a flock of Greater Flamingos *P. roseus*. The offending plovers have been replaced in the Lesser Flamingos' aviary by two pairs of black Mandarin Ducks *Aix galericulata*, a rare mutation

new to the collection. Christopher's other mutation waterfowl include blue Carolina Wood Ducks *A. sponsa*, silver and bronze Mandarins, blue fawn and silver Bahama Pintails *Anas bahamensis* and silver (or are they blue?) Ringed Teal *Callonetta leucophrys*. A single Lapwing *V. vanellus* represented an apparent failure to maintain more than one of the species in the aviary it shares with various ducks and King Pigeons. The extensive range of larger aviaries, made from black plastic-covered chainlink netting on metal frames, at least 10ft (3m) tall and over 40 years old, came from the old zoo up the road. As well as Greater Flamingos - a young group not yet old enough to breed - we saw a nesting colony of Scarlet Ibis *Eudocimus ruber*, which failed to rear young this year, two pairs each of Grey-headed *Larus cirrocephalus* and Pacific Black-tailed Gulls *L. crassirostris* (Christopher's is one of a handful of UK collections currently taking gulls seriously), also the widowed male Bald Eagle *Haliaeetus leucocephalus* who, with his mate who died in 2011, raised over 30 young (sometimes three in one nest).

Larger waterfowl enclosures house Orinoco *Neochen jubata*, Pacific Brent *Branta bernicla nigricans*, Red-breasted *B. ruficollis*, Bar-headed *Anser indicus*, a very tame and attention seeking group of four Blue Snow Geese *A. c. caerulescens* and Emperor Geese *A. canagicus*, which are a particular favourite of their owner. Ducks on view include American *Anas americana*, Chiloe *A. sibilatrix* and European Wigeon *A. penelope* (including a blonde sample), normal-coloured Mandarin Duck, Red-crested Pochard *Netta rufina*, Yellow-billed Duck *A. undulata* and a group of Pacific Black Duck *A. superciliosa*. The last named produced young this year, all of which are being retained with a view to building a stock, as there are too few of this handsome duck in the UK and it is, of course, threatened in its native lands by genetic 'swamping' by the introduced Mallard *A. platyrhynchos*.

Side pens house Trumpeter *Cygnus buccinator*, Bewick's *C. columbianus bewickii* and 'Polish' Mute Swans *C. olor*. The Bewick's breed annually and we saw a single young one. The so-called 'Polish Swan' is a blonde (leucistic) form of the common Mute Swan, with grey legs and feet and a paler coloured beak. They are most striking when cygnets, being white from hatching, without the grey 'ugly duckling' stage. Apparently, this form occurs in Mute Swan populations in continental Europe (one of our party reported seeing mixed broods of white and grey cygnets in the Netherlands), however, I have not seen them at liberty in the UK.

Our Overbrook tour ended in Christopher's museum, which contains many of the birds which over the years graced his collection.



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