

Conversations with Birds

Southern Ground Hornbill
(*Bucorvus leadbeateri*).

by Louise Gordon | EXECUTIVE MANAGER MARKETING AND EDUCATION |
JOHANNESBURG ZOO | SOUTH AFRICA

There are very few visitors who run up to any Zoo staff and excitedly ask: where are the black eagles, the blue cranes, the ground hornbills or any other bird. Their queries are normally focused on the more charismatic animals such as lions, monkeys, chimpanzees and snakes. This is a challenge that we as education staff face every year during our Sasol Bird Fair. (Sasol – a global energy company, headquartered in Johannesburg – is the sponsor of the fair as well as a bird book written exclusively for use in Johannesburg Zoo and fun sheets for 3 levels of schools to be used in the Zoo or at schools.). How to make children excited about birds and associated bird topics. One of our tricks is to have some of our contact animals on display, which consist mostly of reptiles, mammals and one bird. These are used as the “bait” to attract the children’s attention so that you can then launch into your conservation message about birds.

This year I had the envious task of teaching children about bird ringing – a topic that has very little appeal for most except avid birders. Then why teach it, is the next question. The number of wrong answers observed whilst walking through the Zoo as to why birds have rings around the legs, prompted the education lesson. The lessons take place on this particular day only in celebration of the National Bird week and after the Fair, on a bookings basis. Lessons of this nature are intended for primary school groups only aged 7-12 years. The lessons are short and last for duration of

Mike Harman, our Curator of birds demonstrating the adaptations of an owl (Eurasian Eagle Owl *Bubo bubo*).



25 minutes only. The same lessons are repeated for 10 groups of approximately 200 learners at the same time.

Where to start was the next challenge. A wedding ring on my finger was a good enough conversation starter. This resulted in some hilarious chitchat as I actually wear 5 rings and some of the children wanted to know if I was married five times? Next came the question of why birds wear rings and we spoke about the various reasons of ringing birds and the particular system used in Johannesburg Zoo of ringing female birds on the left leg and males then obviously on the right leg. This was a secret, which they could share with their parents in identifying the sex of birds as they toured the Zoo. The use of different coloured rings for large flocks is used to differentiate between individual birds. The open rings are used for species from other institutions or for individuals that you want to identify. The closed ring system is to indicate that the birds were hatched in our Zoo. It is then possible for a bird to wear more than one ring on its leg. If it was hatched in our Zoo and we want to identify it as an individual in a large flock it will wear a closed ring and will wear a coloured open ring on the same leg. When you actually know what you are looking at and why the birds have rings and on which leg, it gives you access to a lot of knowledge about the birds in the Zoo. In other words, it can make you look quite clever amongst your peers.

The best part of the lesson was the measurement demonstration. A volunteer was called to be the bird of the lesson. Wingspan, wing, beak and total body length was measured on my human bird. Weighing was demonstrated and then I could ring my bird. I used Zoo identity tags for the ringing – bright green bands with Johannesburg Zoo printed on them. My human



An Eurasian Eagle Owl (*Bubo bubo*) and Southern White-faced owl (*Ptilopsis granti*) with senior learners who attended the bird fair.

bird was then set free and could fly away. One of the teammates had to go and catch my bird and could return it to Johannesburg Zoo. The finding of its way “home” proved to be quite easy because of its identifying ring. Most learners identified pet identity tags, human identity documents and name tags as the same kind of principle although nobody weighed and measured us for additional information. The lesson was well received and full of fun as it was interactive as a learner was ringed, set free and caught by his/her classmates. The lesson was outdoors and learners were very excited with wild cries of catching their classmate before he/she flew away. Some learners remarked that it might be a good way of identifying young children to prevent them for getting lost in large areas such as the Zoo.

During the Bird Fair day we teach a variety of lessons of which the bird ringing is just one example. Close to two thousand children are taught on this particular day and the lessons are focused on bird identity, the various kinds of birds and their adaptations, nutritional needs, different habitats, the role of water and other natural resources in the lives of humans and animals as well which plants to cultivate in your garden to attract garden birds. It is a very busy programme and one wants the learners to take some new facts home.

Prior knowledge of a topic is essential to scaffold or build your new information upon. The use of wedding rings is a well-known human habit and most children will know what it means if you talk about it. To start off with a well-known topic makes it easier for children to accept and assimilate new knowledge. When they cannot associate new knowledge with anything in their experience, it takes far longer to gain and retain new

information. We as educators are often so enthusiastic about what we know and what we want to share that we often forget to assess prior knowledge or to start off with a well-known fact. Once the conversation is started, you will enjoy a more effective education session, even if it includes your human bird.

The Sasol Bird fair takes place once a year at the Johannesburg Zoo. We have just celebrated the 6th Birdfair and this year was the first time that it coincided with the National Bird Week. Sasol sponsors the National Bird week and supports Birdlife South Africa in general. It was decided to do the Fair in the same week as the National Bird Week to raise awareness for birds on a national level. The theme for 2007 was marine, estuary and fresh water ecology. For 2008 the Fair will be held during the weekend of 2-4 May and the theme will be owls. It is a 3-day event of which the Friday is the day specially focused on schools. The weekend days are focused on families and bird enthusiast with free lectures on birds, nest box building activities, bird products such as food, books, nests, feeding boxes and many more available. You can even book a special birding weekend at a private lodge with bird guides. During the evenings we present a night tour with a dinner for those who want to view the night birds in the Zoo. The Fair is offered at a reduced entrance rate for the weekend only as we would like to raise awareness of birds in as many families as possible. It is highly successful and we are very excited to house it again in May 2008. ♦

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