



Creating the Nation's first BioPark

National Zoological Park · Smithsonian Institution · Washington, D.C. 20008

Letter from the Desk of David Challinor  
August 1, 1991

An ever present concern of zoo staffers is the unexpected sight of an animal wandering or flying around where it should not be. The worry is that the animal will either hurt itself or accidentally harm a visitor. Fortunately, such incidents are rare, but there have been a few examples at the National Zoo and at other zoos which I thought would be of interest to you.

I have not used the word "escape" to describe these incidents because that would suggest that the animal wanted to get out and go someplace else. In most cases, that is not so. For example, each golden lion tamarin family that spends the summer free-ranging in the Zoo's Beaver Valley can go anywhere it wants. In actuality the farthest the tamarins have wandered is to the Small Mammal House, about 300 yards from their nest box. They were evidently attracted by the calls of other tamarins on exhibit there. Visitors often ask, "Why don't they escape?" to which we respond with another question, "Where would they go?"

An even better example of animals remaining in their zoo environment occurred when a beaver wandered from its enclosure in Beaver Valley. This animal found its way out and evidently, after swimming in nearby Rock Creek for two days, returned to its quarters quite on its own.

Some animals clearly have to be helped back to their enclosure, and such was the case of Bonnie, the orangutan, and her baby. Although the keeper had checked the monitor which showed that the electric wire surrounding the orangutan's outdoor habitat was "hot," Bonnie knew otherwise and calmly climbed over the wall of the moat, baby in arm; the wire had a local short. She approached a picnicing family on a nearby bench, where she attracted much attention, and is alleged to have shared fried chicken with her fellow primates. It was several minutes before a visitor casually mentioned Bonnie's whereabouts to a Zoo policeman, who promptly alerted the keepers. The moat was bridged by cardboard boxes and, lured by fresh bananas, Bonnie and her baby were led by hand back to their quarters.

Not all our stories have such happy endings. A large wild tom turkey was on exhibit in the white-tailed deer enclosure. Although his wings were clipped, he could still fly short distances, which he once did. Clearing the fence surrounding his own turf, he landed across the path in the pen of timber wolves,



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the education and recreation of the people."

where he was promptly eaten -- a misfortune for the turkey, but an unexpected meal for the wolves.

Beavers, turkeys and zoo-raised orangutans present minimal risk to visitors. Snakes, especially venomous ones, are another matter, not so much because of the actual danger of a visitor being bitten or strangled by a snake, but because of man's common psychological fear of snakes. A person must almost go out of his/her way to get bitten, as occurred when a teenage boy broke into the Reptile House at night, smashed the glass of a case containing two large, sluggish venomous Gabon vipers, picked up the snakes, put them in a plastic bag, and boarded a bus to go home. While traveling, he was bitten through the bag. Prompt action by the bus driver who summoned help saved the boy's life as some anti-venom was located at the National Institutes of Health and administered in time.

I will close with two snake stories, neither of which happened at the National Zoo. Years ago, when I was Deputy Director of Yale's Peabody Museum, a recently fed 6' boa got out of its glass terrarium in the Museum's basement laboratory where it had been left for the summer. The problem was that the Museum's lab was in the basement of the Yale Secretary's house, who luckily had just left for the Cape with his family. As the senior Museum officer at the time, it was my responsibility to find the boa. I had a vivid image of it eating Kingman Brewster's (Yale's then President) dog, which lived next door. We failed to find the boa, despite all kinds of imaginative stratagems, such as sprinkling flour on the floor around the toilet bowls and putting poison in the toilet water, as we assumed (wrongly) that the boa would come to drink from the toilets. However, the summer passed with no sign of the snake. The family, duly warned by me, moved back, and in truth we forgot about the boa until about Thanksgiving when a lab worker smelled something dead. We finally located the corpse in the false ceiling of the lab where the snake had survived for 5 or 6 months without eating or drinking, an indication of how long such reptiles can survive by lowering their metabolism.

My final snake story is about the day following the heavily publicized opening of a live black mamba exhibit in the entrance hall of a large natural history museum. This particular snake is big (2.5-3m) and very venomous. When the Director walked in that morning, the snake was gone. A thorough search was fruitless, and the moment of decision was fast approaching. When the public entered at the appointed hour, there was a large black mamba in the exhibit case, but not the same one that was there the previous day. The first snake was never found.

From these examples you can understand the importance of an alert staff -- ever on the watch for the untoward occurrence. Through vigilance and carefully rehearsed procedures for handling wayward animals, most major zoos maintain excellent control over their charges. The safety of the animal and of the visiting public is, as it always has been, of primary concern.