

Aquatic birds at the Zoo

Jeya Ratnam



The National Zoological Gardens, a mile or two south of Colombo's city limits, is one of Asia's most famous zoos. The collection of 500 species of birds, mammals, reptiles and fish occupies 45 acres of lush tree-covered grounds. The natural surroundings of many of the exhibits will delight you. Lions splash playfully in an open moat, and spotted deer roam freely in their spacious valley. Brilliantly coloured parrots streak through the overhead branches, and be prepared to meet a poker-faced crane or two as you walk through the park. The birds you will notice most, circling and diving amongst the trees, are the aquatic birds - dozens of cormorants, egrets, herons and ibis milling around in a whirl of activity.

During the nesting season, as many as 500 pairs of these birds congregate at the zoo to breed. The main attraction, from the birds' point of view are two large bodies of water within the zoo premises. These ponds, which are really abandoned quarries, are fed by underground springs and reach depths of about 100 feet. In the old days, zoo elephants were bathed here but it soon became obvious that the ponds were attracting both human visitors and the feathered kind. A small group of wandering herons and king-fishers took up voluntary residence and the aquatic bird exhibit was born.

To build up the bird population, zoo staff paid several visits to Sri Lanka's Dry Zone in the north central and south-eastern parts of the country. The abundance of irrigation tanks and canals here ensures large numbers of freshwater birds. In

the breeding season, selected nests were carefully watched and when the young birds were ready to fly, the zoo staff collected them. Back at the zoo, the fledglings were fed in cages until able to fend for themselves. At this stage, they were released around the ponds. With their feathers clipped to prevent them from flying too far, the birds were still fed at the ponds. When the feathers grew back, a few birds did take off but most stayed, accustomed to the regular feeding and secure environment of the zoo.

Today, the aquatic bird exhibit is holding its own with plenty of breeding at the zoo itself. In fact, most of the ponds' residents use them as home base, choosing to wander off during the day to nearby lakes and marshes. They only return to roost at night and depend very little on the zoo for food. Diving birds like the darters and cormorants also feed on the fish in the ponds. Wading birds such as the herons and egrets only feed in shallow waters and mudflats.

The zoo provides 60 to 70 kilograms of fresh fish a day for these birds. Feeding time at 1 o'clock each afternoon is always a melee as scores of birds fight it out for the free supplies. Other occupants of the ponds also join in the fray, namely some imposing water monitors and Bengal monitors whose angry hissing and puffing add to the confusion. The ponds also hold several kinds of soft-shelled and hard-shelled tortoises which you can spot sunning themselves along the banks. The larger of the two ponds lies within easy reach of the entrance. Walk straight ahead, passing the flamingo pond on your left, until you reach a series of shallow steps. Continue on down to the bottom and you will find yourself at the pond. The light green surface of the water is constantly criss-crossed by flashes of white, grey and black wings. Occasionally a supple bird or two disturbs the smooth, moss-covered surface with a break-neck dive into the depths. Every branch on the trees overlooking the water seems laden with untidy nests made of twigs and weeds. They rest shoulder to shoulder while the owners perch close by keeping a close watch on their young.



Nesting Pelicans.

The whole colony resembles the bird equivalent of a high-rise slum with its attendant cacophony of sound. When the young birds outgrow their nests, they add to the crowded conditions on the branches by hanging around their parents. You can easily catch sight of the fledglings being fed as the trees lie close to the walk. The chicks force their beaks into the parent's throat for regurgitated food. Some birds like the darter even squirt water into the mouths of their chicks.

The larger aquatic birds are bound to catch your attention. The imposing grey pelican with white neck and belly looks almost too big for its nesting site. It builds an enormous structure 75 cm across and 30 cm deep for a nest. The pelican uses its long, heavy beak and fleshy pouch like a net to scoop up fish by holding its head underwater with the beak wide open. The zoo's pelican population is doing so well that, a few years ago, fifteen birds were relocated to a lake north of Colombo. One day all fifteen pelicans were found back at the zoo apparently unhappy with the new place. Fortunately, a smaller group introduced into the Kandy lake, 72 miles from Colombo, has shown no such inclination to return. The painted stork is a very attractive aquatic bird. It is white with black bands across the belly, wings and tail and a delicate pink near the tail. The stork is a wading

bird and searches mud bottoms for crustaceans, frogs and insects with a long, yellow bill. An unusual-looking water bird is the spoonbill with its characteristic spatula-shaped beak. Spoonbill chicks are born with a normal beak which gradually thickens and widens as they mature. The bill serves as a kind of sieve as the bird sweeps the water from side to side when searching for food. The white ibis also has a special beak suited to its foraging technique. It is long and curved, ideal for probing around in the mud shallows.

Another common wading bird is the heron which is found in marshy areas standing motionless as it hunts. A sudden jerk of its neck and a victim lies impaled on the sharp beak before being swallowed. The zoo has grey herons with a white crown and neck and sporting a long black crest. The purple heron is so called because it gives off a shiny purple when it catches the sun. The night heron, as its name implies, hunts at dusk and early morning. During the day it is a silent and secretive bird hardly noticeable as it sits hunched on the branches. All herons have long legs and slender necks well adapted to hunting frogs, insects, fish and even small birds. The egrets are also waders with long necks and sharp beaks. The cattle egret, which in the countryside can be spotted on the backs of cattle feeding on ticks and other creatures, is a white bird with a yellow beak. The zoo has several kinds of egrets including the median egret and large egret. Cormorants and darters, or snake birds, are diverse. They catch fish by swimming underwater using their wings as if in flight. Cormorants are black with a slender, pointed beak that is hooked at the end. The birds have very large appetites and are voracious eaters often interfering with fishermen's catches. Cormorants swim only exposing the tops of their heads. They dive by leaping up and disappearing for some time underwater.

Darters have extremely sharp, pointed bills and special necks that can dart out to capture a fish. Unlike the cormorant, the darter dives by sinking quietly underwater without a trace. Around the zoo ponds you will also be able to spot purple coots and Indian waterhens. Other birds that frequent waterways are the kingfishers. The common variety and the white-breasted kingfisher are both at the zoo. Housed inside cages is a rarer kingfisher, the pied, with black and white colouring. This kind only eats fish unlike the others in the family who also feed on insects, frogs and grubs. Another water bird that is displayed inside is the scarlet ibis, a native of South America. This species and the flamingo you see at the entrance are the only exotic water birds at the zoo. All the rest are endemic to Sri

Lanka and India. If ever you feel like putting in a stint of birdwatching, you don't have to pack a bag and trek to the wilds of the Dry Zone. The nearby National Zoological Gardens offer you the perfect setting for observing the ceaseless activities of a large colony of a Sri Lankan water birds at close range. The zoo is open daily from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. and charges a nominal entrance fee. It also offers restaurant, picnic and parking facilities.



Young Painted Stork nesting.



A painted stork with young.



Teal are among the better known water birds of Sri Lanka.