

ZOOING THE GRAND CANYON STATE

Ken Kawata explores the zoos of Arizona

– PART ONE –



Black-footed Ferret at Phoenix Zoo

LOCATED IN THE Southwestern USA, Arizona, slightly smaller than Italy in terms of land area, is a state land-locked between Utah to the north and Sonora, Mexico, to the south. Nicknamed ‘The Grand Canyon state’, its capital is Phoenix. In late November through early December 2022, my wife Jean and I attended a Zoological Association of America (ZAA) annual conference in a Phoenix suburb, and extended the trip into Tucson to visit more zoos.

A JOKE MORPHS INTO PHOENIX ZOO

Births of zoos take different styles. Some begin with an organised and structured process, built in accordance with guidelines by an administrative body and this may be termed “constitutional”. By comparison some others come into existence in an unofficial manner, for instance, as a citizen brings in an animal or two into a city park, thus a zoo starts “by happenstance” (Kawata, 2014). Actually there also is a hybrid form that could illustrate an unusual beginning, such as a case of Robert Maytag, grandson of the founder of the Maytag appliance company. He was also an adventurer, filmmaker and sportsman. As his widow Nancy Maytag Love recalled that Phoenix Zoo “was born in a cocktail lounge, a bar, in St. Thomas, the Virgin Islands”. In the spring of 1961, Nancy and Robert were near the end of a sport-fishing expedition in the Caribbean. One evening at sunset in St. Thomas, they were having a drink in a favourite dockside lounge when they fell to discussing what they would do when they returned to their new home in Phoenix. “Bob was looking for something purposeful to do with his life” Nancy said. “He asked me what I thought he should do and out of a clear blue sky I said, “Why don’t you build a zoo in Phoenix?” I have no idea where the notion came from.” Nancy recalled. From that moment on, he and Nancy talked critically about the idea late into the night with many more late nights to follow.

There had already been at least two zoos of sorts in

Phoenix Zoo entrance



White Rhino at Phoenix Zoo

the area. The first was built in January 1933 in Papago Park, pre-dating the Phoenix Zoo by nearly 30 years. Managed by the Arizona Game and Fish Department, it was a small facility devoted to native animals. Evidently, it was short-lived. The second zoo was a somewhat larger private enterprise that operated on Seventh Street north of Bethany Home Road. Named Jungle Park Zoo or Tropic Garden Zoo by a series of owners, it was in business from the 1950s to the early 1980s. Neither zoo was on the grand scale that city leaders hoped for as a major community attraction.

Maytag first announced his intention to form a nonprofit organisation, the Arizona Zoological Society that held its first meeting on 27th April, 1961, then donated \$100,000 of his own money (which would be equivalent to ca. \$995,000 in 2022) to start off the fundraising. “It was a period of delightful, enthusiastic chaos” recalled Nancy. During this stage Robert Maytag opposed to name the zoo The Maytag Zoo. Then in 1962, aboard his yacht in San Diego, he developed pneumonia. Early in the morning of 14th March he tragically died at the age of 38 after devoting the last 11 months of his life to building the Phoenix Zoo.

The zoo opened on 21st November that same year and Nancy cut the ribbon. By the end of its first summer the zoo was deep in debt and near to closing. There were sombre, late-night meetings between board members and creditors, most of whom left with nothing more than promises. Some employees were let go; animals were sold to other zoos to raise money. (Anon., 1992) This was the genesis of this zoo. Today the Phoenix Zoo thrives as a prominent institution.

OUTSTANDING ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The Arabian Oryx conservation project. The species became extinct in the wild in 1972 but a small number were in captivity. The Phoenix Zoo and the Fauna and Flora Preservation Society of London (now Fauna and Flora International) played a major role in saving the species with financial assistance from the World



Above left: California Condor Aviary at Phoenix Zoo. **Below:** Chacoan Peccary

Wildlife Fund. Starting with nine animals, the zoo took up the endeavour often referred to as Operation Oryx. In 1962 the oryx started the first captive-breeding herd and soon the zoo began to send offspring to other zoos. A reintroduction process into the wild was ready by 1980.

When Robert Maytag held the first board meeting of a zoo society in 1961, the population of Phoenix was 584,000; by 2021 it stood at 1,625 million, quite a change from the early 1970s which is when I began to visit this wonderful urban oasis. The zoo is more visitor-friendly now, with stroller rentals and refreshment stands that bear such names as Jungle Java and Kettle Korner. The first stop of our tour was a native animal section called Arizona Trail. It is a walk-through aviary in addition to a herpetological section in a building in which 18 or so taxa of rattlesnakes were housed. Among them was the Arizona Ridge-nosed Rattlesnake (*Crotalus willardi obscurus*) the official state reptile. The state of Arizona is to be congratulated for choosing a hated and feared venomous snake as a symbol of nature. Leaving the area we walked past an exhibit for the endangered Mexican Wolf (*Canis lupus baileyi*), regionally called the Lobo.

We noted that visiting families paid close attention to information in the signage and graphics. According to some, more than 40 per cent of the Tucson population is Hispanic. To make a comparison nearly 80 per cent of the Detroit (Michigan) population is black, yet very few visit their local zoo (Kawata, 2022). “Historically, the conservation movement has tended to be insular and exclusive, serving the interests of white male conservationists and not allowing space for diverse perspectives” (Anon., 2023). So it is encouraging to see the minority ethnic group here – their children could become future biologists or zoo staff.

Returning to exhibits, we skipped Children’s Trail, Harmony Farm and the horse stable to focus on wild species. Tall palm trees were reminders of the climate suitable for a zoo. Next was Tropics Trail, a pond with



“The state of Arizona is to be congratulated for choosing a hated and feared venomous snake as a symbol of nature”

small islands, then on to African Trail. These two trails were home to an extensive, representative stock of crowd pleasers. They ranged from Lion and Tiger, giraffe and zebra, Asian Elephant and White Rhino, to Mandrill, Hamadryas Baboon and Bornean Orangutan. In one corner a herd of Arabian Oryx stood quietly chewing the cud, totally oblivious to our sentimental memory of their predecessors that had made history.

In terms of exhibits the zoo does not have those wide and deep moats, dry or wet, separating visitors from the animals. This style, once prevalent in the USA, uses mock rock extensively and wrongly portrays popular mammals such as Chimpanzees, Tigers and elephants as cave dwellers. In nature there are not actually that many large mammals that live in or near bedrock.

On to the aforementioned orangutans, their exhibit contained a wooden climbing apparatus which resembled a playground gym. There was nothing naturalistic about it: it was the antithesis of the landscape immersion school of thought and potentially open to

criticism from that group. Their viewpoint, however, often doesn't consider the animals that live in zoos. Orangutans, as arboreal tropical rainforest dwellers, do not care what appeals to designers, builders, zoo staff or visitors; they simply use the structure anyway.

Next was an uphill walkway toward the north end of the zoo with a new exhibit under construction. Up in a hilly area were some native ungulates, the Bighorns, in a more naturalistic setting. The tour ended when we walked past the Arizona Trail and returned to the entrance/exit.

WILDLIFE WORLD ZOO – MICKEY'S LEGACY

Returning to the genesis of zoos, some are started in a constitutional way by organisations like a government body or a zoological society, while others are created by individuals. Germany's Carl Hagenbeck left a huge mark in zoo history as one of these individuals. In England examples include Chester Zoo with George Saul Mottershead; Gerald Durrell with Jersey Zoo; Sir Peter Scott with Wildfowl & Wetlands Centres and John Aspinall with Howletts and Port Lympne. Uniquely Jimmy Chipperfield, a controversial figure, started the revolutionary safari parks at Longleat (Tofts, 2022). On this side of the Atlantic we also have renowned individuals, one of them being the late Mickey Ollson, a native of Arizona. He established World Wildlife Zoo in a suburb of Phoenix. The word 'Aquarium' was added later and now it's called Wildlife World Zoo, Aquarium & Safari Park. This zoo hosted the 2022 ZAA conference.

Josef Lindholm sent me this email in January 2022: "Mickey Ollson was born on the 12th of May, 1941. His childhood interest in captive birds was already well developed; by the time he was 10 years old he was sent a pair of Northern Pintails as a present from Calvin Wilson, Superintendent of the Tracy Aviary in Salt Lake City after his first visit there. When Mickey was 16 he sold all his birds to buy his first car, but very quickly began raising budgerigars on a commercial scale. At 21 he was running a successful business producing large numbers of guinea pigs and show-quality rabbits as well as breeding Llamas and muntjac. His important bird collection, then known as Ollson's Rare Bird & Animal Farm, was based in Glendale, Arizona. Jean Delacour first visited in 1968 and described it as one of the largest and finest collections of tropical and subtropical birds to be found in the western world, with the collection of Cracidae the biggest in existence. Delacour gathered data from this collection for his 1973 monograph on Cracidae which he co-authored with Dean Amadon.

"In 1975 Mickey sold a large collection of birds to Disney's Treasure Island Park (this was renamed Discovery Island in 1978). He then made the down payment on land in Litchfield Park, Arizona, and opened Wildlife World Zoo in 1984. At this point he retired from being a junior high school teacher after 19 years. The zoo has become one of the major animal collections in the USA, set on an 80-acre site and with 500,000 visitors a year."

He bred large numbers of attractive species such as Ocellated Turkey and Stanley Crane. He used to say "my profession is aviculture and my day job is teaching". When word got out that he was about to quit the



Left: Orangutan climbing frame at Phoenix Zoo. **Below:** Entrance to Wildlife World Zoo & Aquarium



day job and open his own zoo, his friends, yours truly included, were surprised. "Are you sure?" was a typical reaction; it sounded like a big gamble to build a zoo in the backyard of the established Phoenix Zoo. But it became apparent by 1984 that Mickey had won the gamble hands down. His zoo is a shining example in a rare category of successful and still expanding privately-owned zoos. (Kawata, 2017a)

Mickey and I used to joke and discuss zoos with each other. When he decided to let the public feed the Giraffes I disagreed. "Why not?" he would ask. I thought it might cause health problems for the animals. But we eventually agreed when I suggested adding staff supervision.

He was also an entertaining story teller. When I visited the zoo he would show me what appeared to be a desert vacant lot and say that he was going to build this or that. On my next visit I saw how the plan had been executed. Somehow he seemed to know that after

'It sounded like a big gamble to build a zoo in the backyard of the established Phoenix Zoo'

all, a zoo is an accumulation of mundane, seemingly trivial tasks that lead to improbable dreams in the end. The years passed, and the news of his death on the 9th January 2022 struck all of his friends with deep sorrow.

A grove of trees loomed as I drove into his zoo with its vast cultivated landscape. Soon the gate appeared on my right – Mickey's brainchild. Inside a tram train, seated sky-ride, soaring eagle zip line, flying scooter ride, carousel ride and more, greeted me. These rides blend in with the animal exhibits. I noticed an enclosed lory/parakeet feeding station, yet another money maker. These theme-park elements may not be to some zoo enthusiasts' taste but I think: how did an aviculturist school teacher develop such an entrepreneur's spirit?

The animal enclosures are laid out in segments loosely based on taxonomy or geography. An African theme takes up a large part of the grounds. What stands out is the absence of the mock rock already mentioned. The majority of medium-to-small mammals and birds are housed in welded-wire meshed conventional cages. Would these hard barriers invite criticism from citizens John and Jane Doe? In my opinion, if you watch the visitors closely, they don't seem to think of them as animal jails; they seem to ignore the wire mesh. Up close, not viewed across wide and deep concrete moats, the barriers probably seem to disappear. I was surprised at the Jaguar exhibit by the closeness; the cat was in an elevated wire-meshed walkway and was staring down at me right above my head. It was so close it seemed almost within reach!

Physical barriers are non-existent in some places. Islands for primates such as White-faced Capuchins are surrounded by shallow moats with no guardrail, so any stupid person could wade right onto an island. I would not try this method in a city zoo.

Wildlife World Zoo is still privately owned thus it does not project an image of a powerhouse zoo such as the San Diego Zoo. So it could be targeted by those



critical of keeping wild animals in captivity, or even by purists within the zoo circle. They might ask: Where were the animals sourced? Are they being kept in accordance with appropriate laws? Are sociable animals in solitary confinement? Are they allowed to breed? Is there any scientific research being conducted here? What conservation programmes are there? To such

Monkey island at Wildlife World Zoo & Aquarium. Note the aerial barriers



Simple animal cages at Wildlife World Zoo & Aquarium

Species seen at Wildlife World Zoo & Aquarium, December 2022

During my tour I jotted down what I saw: there were roughly 40 species of mammals (excluding domestic stock such as camelids and cattle) and a little over 50 species of birds, in addition to half a dozen species of large reptiles. I missed a couple of exhibits and species.

MAMMALS: Red Ruffed Lemur, Ring-tailed Lemur, Golden-headed Lion Tamarin, Tufted Capuchin, Colombian White-faced Capuchin, Common Squirrel Monkey, Geoffroy's Spider Monkey, Eastern Black-&White Colobus, Vervet Monkey, Schmidt's Red-tailed Guenon, De Brazza's Monkey, Olive Baboon, Hamadryas Baboon, Siamang, White-handed Gibbon, Pileated Gibbon, African Crested Porcupine, Black-backed Jackal, White-nosed Coati, Striped Hyena, Spotted Hyena, Jaguar, Leopard, 'Bengal' Tiger (including white tigers), Lion, Cheetah, Rock Hyrax, White Rhinoceros, Red River Hog, Warthog, Reeves' Muntjac, Reticulated Giraffe, Addax, Greater Kudu, Springbok, Arabian Oryx, Beisa Oryx, Blesbok, Nyala. Represented by six orders and 16 families.

BIRDS: Common Ostrich, White Ibis, Scarlet Ibis, Abdim's Stork, Chilean Flamingo, Trumpeter Swan, Black Swan, Coscoroba Swan, Common Shelduck, Magpie Goose, Andean Condor, Helmeted Curassow, Great Curassow, Green Peafowl, Argus Pheasant, Golden Pheasant, Ocellated Turkey, Satyr Tragopan, White-naped Crane, Sarus Crane, East African Crowned Crane, West African Crowned Crane, Demoiselle Crane, Stanley Crane, Grey-winged Trumpeter, Giant Wood Rail, Nicobar Pigeon, Victoria Crowned Pigeon, Western Crowned Pigeon, Umbrella Cockatoo, Black Palm Cockatoo, Eclectus Parrot, Red-fronted Macaw, Severe Macaw, Illiger's Macaw, Hyacinth Macaw, Cuban Amazon Parrot, Lady Ross's Turaco, Guinea Turaco, Violet Turaco, White-cheeked Turaco, Verreaux's Eagle Owl, Eurasian Eagle Owl, Blue-winged Kookaburra, Southern Ground Hornbill, Silvery-cheeked Hornbill, Von Der Decken's Hornbill, Wreathed Hornbill, Keel-billed Toucan, and (probably the 'zoo-rarity' of the bird collection) Purplish-backed Jay (*Cyanocorax beecheii*).

Represented by 14 Orders and 18 Families. All in all, waders made up about one-fifth of the species. Psittacine and gallinaceous types held close to a quarter of the species.

REPTILES: Once stepping into the reptile building called Tropics of the World, visitors were overwhelmed by a large number of exhibit units. There were at least 16 larger exhibit units in addition to 35 smaller ones. I gave up on trying to inventory all species and focused on larger forms, including Indian Star Tortoise, Rhinoceros Iguana, Yellow Anaconda, Spectacled Caiman and Saltwater Crocodile.

AQUARIUM. A full-scale aquarium with an excellent restaurant was a relatively new addition to this institution, located behind the east entrance of the zoo across from the parking lot. Regrettably our visit with limited time did not allow detailed and justifiable description of this facility. In one of the previous visits Mickey and I sat down in front of a large shark tank to enjoy lunch, a poignant memory now.

people I say take it easy folks. When I visit this type of zoo I document data for the sake of zoo history, not as a self-appointed policeman or a conservation authority.

In terms of a species/specimen count this zoo would not match the San Diego Zoo, yet there were many interesting animals. That said, with Mickey out of the picture now, the collection is bound to be modified in the future. Moreover, in recent decades maintaining a large collection has become an antiquated philosophy, at least in this country. Based on that road map the zoo world has strongly placed conservation as the centre of the universe. That aside, to the casual visitor the collection may appear no different to dozens of other zoos. Also, the largest numbers of mammal and bird species groups such as rodents, bats and passerines are under-represented. Generally speaking, Mickey's collection follows the national tendency to keep crowd-pleasing stock such as primates, carnivores and mega-herbivores, the aim being to increase gate revenue. Overall, there exists less taxonomic diversity in the mammal group. However, it does not require a trained eye to figure out his distinctive aviculturist's richer choice of bird species. Strangely there are no penguins, possibly the most appealing bird to the public. Yet in another popular group, the cranes, the zoo has six of the 15 species. Four species of hornbill and eight species of psittacines also reveal Mickey's tastes. An even closer look leads to rather picky questions: Why have Green Peafowl instead of the easier to acquire and maintain Blue Peafowl? Is it because the former is an endangered species? It's too late to ask him now, but I think they were closer to Mickey's heart.

ODYSEA AQUARIUM – FISH PANORAMA IN THE RAIN

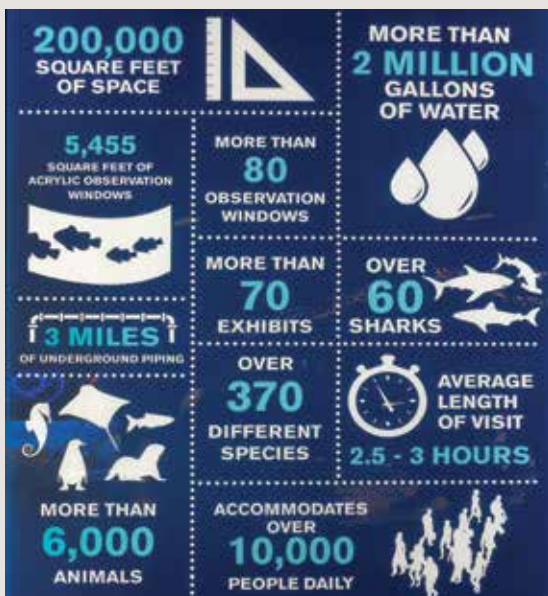
On average, Phoenix receives five to 25 mm (or 0.2 to 1.0 inches) of rainfall in December. Luckily we were inside a building, OdySea Aquarium, as a shower turned into a downpour, bringing a whole month's worth of precipitation. As we stepped inside, we noticed piped-in music, an indicator that this aquarium, opened in 2016, is keenly focused on tourism. In other words it gave an impression of an amusement complex with animals. Smiling, uniformed attendants abounded to help visitors. Exhibits were on two levels, conveniently accessible with escalators to areas such as

Below: The entrance to OdySea Aquarium





Touch pool at OdySea Aquarium



A statistical information sign at OdySea Aquarium

aqua lobby, kids cove, sea trek and OdySea voyager, “the world’s only rotating aquarium experience”. (I might add that you can even view sharks from the toilet). The public areas were kept dark, making exhibits stand out, a standard principle in indoor design to create an inviting atmosphere. Padded benches in front of the pacu tank must be welcomed by senior citizens.

Exhibit styles varied with different heights, sizes and shapes and multiple viewing levels of tanks; in addition to traditional tanks there were small pools and free-standing glass-fronted units. They housed diversified animal groups such as a two-toed sloth, a toucan and a Gila Monster (I had never before seen a Gila Monster taking a sip of water as I watched at a close range). The toucan cage had a variety of toys, apparently for behavioural enrichment. It was a weekend, and common practice of aquariums were noticeable such as a contact pool with stingrays and keeper lectures. By the way, what is “The Voyager”? The entire small theatre rotates as visitors are seated comfortably, swivelling around four large tanks holding California Sea-lions, sharks and sea turtles while an attendant gives a narration. ■

Oceans as a main exhibit subject represent an antithesis to the nature of this land-locked desert state, a welcome theme in the community. Overall it is a nice aquarium even though there is no outstanding ‘holy grail’ that highlights the facility, such as a huge shark tank with a walk-through tunnel. One other thing: the admission prices, adult \$43.95, military \$41.95, child \$32.95 seem a bit steep compared with the much larger Phoenix Zoo: adult \$39.95, child \$29.95. But we all know that at the end of the day, they all have to make a living.

Part Two next issue.

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