

A CONTRASTING MIXTURE: VISITS TO SOME WEST EUROPEAN COLLECTIONS

BY JOHN PARTRIDGE

Regular readers will know that I lead a group of people to Europe each year visiting zoos. Our 1995 tour once again took us mainly to the Netherlands and Germany, where we visited five collections in seven days. A short journey over the Dutch border into Belgium on our first day took us to Antwerp. The zoo, one of the oldest in Europe, is set right in the middle of the city and adjacent to the main railway station. We were pleased to see it full of visitors and extremely busy.



White-lipped peccaries at Antwerp Zoo. (Photo: John Partridge)

Antwerp Zoo is well known for many husbandry successes over the years, babirusa and okapi being just two that immediately come to mind. The grounds are crammed full of zoological 'goodies' housed amongst some interesting architecture. It reminds me very much of the old-style menagerie – a huge variety of species are to be found here and, in some cases, modernisation of enclosures is required and will certainly come in time. The aquarium is delightful, and I was particularly impressed with the

presentation of the marine tanks here. Other large houses include those for reptiles, dolphins and nocturnal animals, with the young lesser Malay mouse deer (*Tragulus javanicus*) taking pride of place for me. I think it is the first time I have seen spotted genets (*Genetta genetta*) looking relaxed and content rather than continually pacing their enclosure.

Primates are well represented, with all four species of anthropoid ape – including pygmy chimpanzees (*Pan paniscus*) – being shown; several species of guenon (*Cercopithecus* spp.) also come to mind as I look over my notes. Other notable species we saw included a very nice group of white-lipped peccaries (*Tayassu pecari*), wart hogs, banteng, fairy blue penguins (*Eudyptula minor*), and a southern elephant seal (*Mirounga leonina*). It was also quite a novelty to see African lion cubs, jaguar cubs (one spotted and the other melanistic) and pumas.

For me, the day held a mixture of feelings ranging from respect for a well-established zoo to sadness where some animals so badly needed rehousing – although everything I saw looked in excellent health, and it really was a treat to see so many species in one place. Of course, it mustn't be forgotten that the Royal Zoological Society of Antwerp also owns Planckendael, a much larger country estate situated outside the city. There wasn't time to visit it on this occasion, but we'll be back.



Visitors and squirrel monkey at Apenheul. (Photo: John Partridge)

Next day we visited Apenheul's primates, and what a day that was! I cannot see how anyone could fail to be impressed by this animal collection, a total contrast to Antwerp in terms of presentation and species held. The setting is beautiful, with the initial walk from the main gate to the primate area taking people through woodland which is worth a visit in itself – I stole half an hour later in the day for a quick stroll there, and it was lovely. The basic concept of the primate park itself is to give

people the opportunity to come into contact with selected monkey species. Anything valuable and accessible to inquisitive hands and tails has to be removed before entering the monkey areas, and special bags are provided for their safe keeping. The first visitor area holds squirrel monkeys (*Saimiri* spp. – these were black-capped) and black howlers (*Alouatta caraya*), and although the latter species held true to form and did very little apart from lie about in the trees well above head height, the eighty or so squirrel monkeys were much more active and frequently perched on and leaped on and off people. Regular feeding times in seated gathering areas gave people ample opportunity for close contact, and I am sure that the visitors went away with a lasting and very positive impression of their experiences with these primates. I have to say that I couldn't avoid a shudder or two when seeing young children approach these animals and lovingly put their faces close to the monkeys' mouths. Youthful ignorance is bliss, and perhaps the observation shows the different ways of thought that exist between the U.K. and continental Europe. It is unlikely that such an undertaking would be allowed in Great Britain.

Other walk-in areas included close encounters with Barbary macaques (*Macaca sylvanus*) and Barbary sheep (*Ammotragus lervia*), including a very large male of the latter species; white-throated capuchins (*Cebus capucinus*) and woolly monkeys; white-faced sakis, golden lion tamarins and ring-tailed lemurs. There were also many enclosed species such as the lowland gorilla bands who shared their island homes with patas monkeys. There were several marmoset and tamarin species, spider monkeys, lar gibbons, capybara and Asian short-clawed otters. All in all, we found our visit to Apeneul a remarkable experience and most enjoyable.



Australian pelicans at Walsrode. (Photo: John Partridge)

A long coach journey then took us into Germany and to Walsrode Bird Park. Many people in the party were a bit dubious about a full day here, simply because they are 'mammal people' (quite right too, so am I) and didn't think they would be able to endure a full day in a bird park. At the end of the visit, they all admitted to being wrong and wanted to stay longer! I defy anyone not to be impressed with this place. The whole concept is first-class, with superbly laid out grounds, very clean aviaries and excellent waitress-service restaurants. If you follow the one-way system, which is clearly marked, it is impossible to get lost and you are guaranteed to see everything. It all really is very good – and I've yet to mention the birds! Walsrode is well known for so many species: its lory-atrarium; its parrots; its cranes and storks; its ratites (with all three species of cassowary); its tropical hall and so on. I don't think I'm qualified to pass comment on the birds seen here, as I'm far more used to dealing with hoofed stock, but suffice to say that as a non-bird person I enjoyed Walsrode.

Next came Hanover and a more conventional zoo. It is well-known for its large mammals, and I enjoyed seeing Defassa waterbuck, Kirk's dikdik, lesser kudu, hartebeest, impala and springbok, not to mention a lovely group of drills, red-crowned mangabeys, and walruses. There were also black rhinos with a calf, Asian elephants, common hippos, and a mixed bear exhibit comprising polar, American black and brown bears. The walruses were in their twenties and, although housed in a small pool, had lived at the zoo for many years. As I understand it, these animals are quite difficult to keep in captivity. Hanover Zoo is on the brink of changes both in its management structure, where new faces are about to take a fresh look at the direction the zoo must take in the future, and in enclosure design and re-building. It must be said that some areas are small and rather cramped for their inhabitants. Such changes take time and money, and it is to be hoped that the necessary alterations will take place when circumstances permit.

On our way home to England we re-visited Burgers' Zoo at Arnhem, principally to see the Desert House which was being built during our visit in 1993. We were not disappointed, and it is quite easy to spend a whole day in this area and the adjoining Rain Forest House. Both areas are linked by an underground tunnel and offer superb wet/cold weather accommodation as well as excellent educational facilities. Manatees breed in one of the large pools here, as well as sharing the water with capybaras and black pacus (*Colossoma nigripinnis*). The illusions created in these houses are very good and, for example, it took me a long time to realise that the rattlesnakes really couldn't get into the peccary area, which in turn led to public pathways. There was glass between the snakes and the peccaries, but it wasn't easy to see.

The Mangrove House at Arnhem is also very good with its simulated rising and falling tide. Elsewhere, there are 32 chimpanzees with an on-going study programme that goes back many years, a nice gorilla group, and a large safari area which is no longer drive-through. Instead, visitors walk along covered, elevated walkways to watch the giraffes (it was splendid to see a herd of some ten animals running), zebras, greater kudu and white rhinos. When completed this winter, this walkway will extend to the carnivores nearby, too.

This year's tour provided a week of thought-provoking contrasts from the old-style menagerie concept of Antwerp to the high-tech immersion halls of Arnhem. In addition, Apenheul and Walsrode showed us how specialist collections, done well, could grab and hold the attention of people even if they weren't particularly interested in the subject. I know I enjoyed the contrasts, and I am indebted to the staff of the zoos involved, who kindly spent time to tell us about their animals and their plans for the future.

For September 1996, I am hoping to be able to take a party to Berlin. Please write for details.

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