

ZOO PROFILE WHIPSNADE WILD ANIMAL PARK – A 60th ANNIVERSARY PORTRAIT

BY RICHARD A. KOCK

When Whipsnade Park opened in 1931 it was an entirely new concept, though it had elements in common with older zoos like Regent's Park, and aspects not dissimilar from the deer parks often found in association with stately homes. Sir Peter Chalmers Mitchell, whose idea led to the purchase of the land and the setting up of the park by the Zoological Society of London, had enormous foresight and understanding of animal husbandry. It was felt that animals would breed well in this open environment, and this has proved to be the case with nearly one hundred per cent of the animals kept. One of the obvious advantages of the paddock systems at Whipsnade was the reduced cost of keeping large grazing animals where natural pasture and woodland could be utilized, reducing the number of buildings, feed costs and infrastructure. Testament to the success of the idea was the continued popularity of Whipsnade over its first 50 years with very little reinvestment: its appeal came from the spacious parkland setting in which the animals were displayed – a 'lung' for the crowded urban populace of south-east England.

The one element that was perhaps neglected in later years was public facilities. Visitors to the park often had to walk many miles without shelter in rain and wind, and were sometimes disappointed by the vastness of the

paddocks and the apparent smallness of the animals, who would frequently disappear into the distance. In recent years people have become more demanding and less willing to exercise for their leisure and education. Numbers of visitors fell, and a fresh look at the situation was needed as income dropped. The Society decided to give more attention to developments at Whipsnade, to reorganise and put some capital finance into the park.

The first area to be redeveloped was the core. This included investment in some of the original estate buildings, creating what was called the Discovery Centre. People could get out of the rain at last. This experience exposed them to interactive equipment to help them understand themselves better, a spectacular video about conservation and three simulated environments, a desert world, an aquatic world and a tropical forest. Species are carefully selected to provide a key message relating to the ecosystem and are viewed in context, achieving an experience quite rare in zoos. The Centre has proved to be extremely popular, particularly with educational groups. Where possible species are kept in a breeding situation and, if rare, the importance of *ex situ* conservation breeding is emphasised. This concept is being developed further, and with the aid of computerisation produces a very worthwhile contribution to conser-

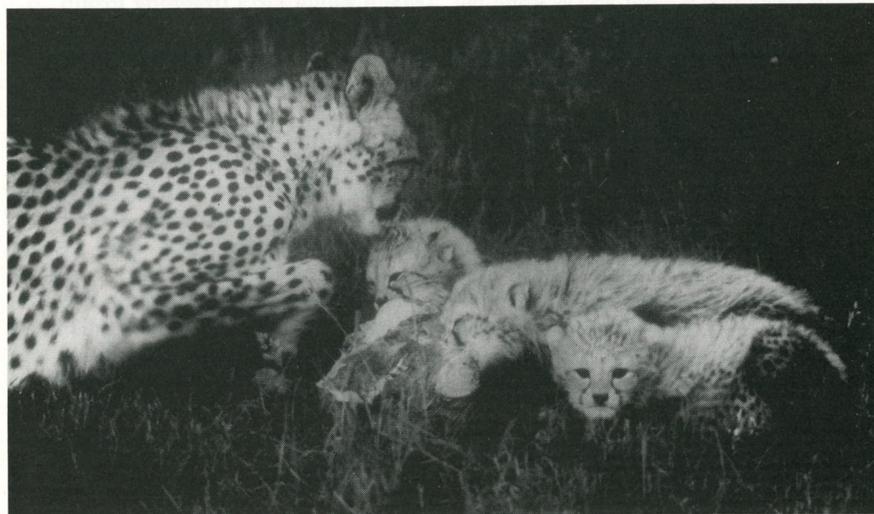
vation education. Other facilities created included an adventure playground, animal activity areas and a children's farm.

For the main non-domestic ungulate groups locations were rationalised to provide geographical zoning – Africa, Asia, Europe and the North. There was also a change in how species were kept. Rather than 'pigeon-holing' each individual species in its own paddock, different species, where compatible, were now maintained together.

For the domestic stock a new farm was built with ideas old and new. Whipsnade had a reputation in the past for retaining old types of domestic stock, a gene bank with a significant number of the rarer breeds such as Chartley cattle and Manx Loghton sheep. It was from the Society's activities that the Rare Breeds Survival Trust evolved, a thriving organisation in Britain dedicated to conserving the older breeds of domestic livestock. In 1990 it was decided to recreate a traditional farm at Whipsnade and bring back representatives of the rarer breeds to educate the public in farming developments and the values of some of the older domestic

stock and methods of farming. This replaced an old-style Children's Zoo which, although greatly loved by local people, was difficult to manage, with an inconvenient layout and costly maintenance. This area was converted to an Animal Care Centre for hand rearing and specialist husbandry. The contact between, in particular, young children and domestic animals is considered by the Society to be very important, and we encourage interaction without putting any stress on the individual animal. The farm was designed to allow close contact without literally putting the animals into a corner! This also led to involvement of staff in 'Meet the Animals' sessions, when domesticated and hand-reared stock are brought into an arena where there is discussion and contact with the public in a formal way which has been exceptionally popular.

Some of the rarer African antelopes are doing very well with new housing at Whipsnade. With some species, for example our roan antelopes, we have found heated housing to be an advantage, whereas others, such as the scimitar-horned oryx, thrive without it. The latter species was recently reintro-



Cheetah with cubs at Whipsnade Wild Animal Park

duced to Tunisia, and Whipsnade staff have been collaborating in this programme. Future reintroductions are on the horizon, for example with the Przewalski's horse, an international initiative in which Whipsnade will play its part.

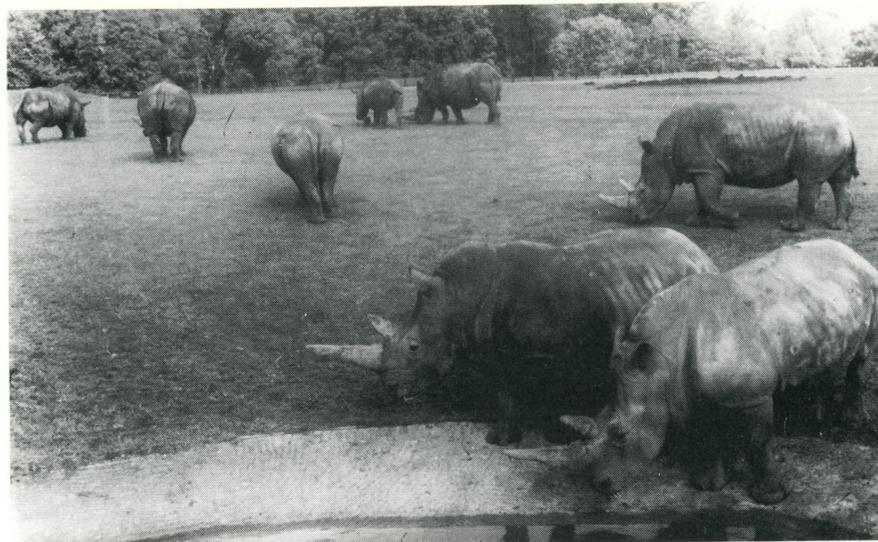
Animals like gazelles which can have adverse interaction with larger hoofstock have their own area, but are provided with creeps into larger paddocks with other species, so that they have the choice which is better for their social organisation. A number of rare deer are maintained together in a very large paddock system which includes woodland, open grassland and wetlands. This enables the different species to utilise the environment in a more natural way, and also helps to educate the general public as to why, for example, a Chinese water deer is so named, thus enhancing their understanding and enjoyment of what are usually thought of as some of the less spectacular animals. It also provides a dynamic location to explain recent conservation initiatives such as that for the Père David's deer. Part of the Whipsnade herd with a few individuals from other collections in the U.K. (a total of 39 animals) went to Da Feng in China in 1986 and are reproducing well. Since the majority of these deer came from the extensively managed group at Whipsnade, this project reinforces the value of keeping animals in as natural a situation as possible, to enable us (and them) to learn more about the natural behaviours, utilisation of space and natural foods essential to their survival in the wild. Graphics at this exhibit are orientated to tell a story about the individual species in their natural environment: care is taken to illustrate the real situation, including threats and human interaction.

Carnivores at Whipsnade have bred well, and in particular animals normally found to be reluctant breeders, such as the cheetah, 130 offspring of which have been produced from three

generations. However, facilities for the carnivores were becoming dated, some of the cages having been built in the 1930s. One of the new developments for the Diamond Jubilee is 'Tiger Falls'. The Siberian tiger is an endangered species with a reasonable future in its native environment, but at such low numbers that the captive community may need to contribute individuals in the future to maintain the genetic diversity necessary for continued evolution. With that in mind, if tigers are to be kept long-term in confinement their conditions should be better than the old barred cage. 'Tiger Falls' has been designed to provide a good amount of space, with a woodland and a large pond with fresh running water coming from a replica waterfall; the exhibit is designed so that public viewing is not through bars or fences or even glass. Visitors get an overview of the whole enclosure, and are encouraged to see it and the animals in context. The plants used are appropriate to the region the tigers come from. When the planting matures in a few years it will carry a very strong message about this species and its conservation, as well as providing a decent home for a breeding group.

Other areas where improvements have been made include the old chimpanzee exhibit, an uninspiring building with an ironwork play area. It was felt that with a relatively small investment a large island could be produced using electric fencing as a barrier. This was completed over last winter and is now being used by the chimpanzees, without any serious problems to date. The perspective for the public is of seeing the animals in an outdoor environment using trees and space in a more natural manner. Although more common elsewhere in Europe, this approach is still rare in the United Kingdom.

Whipsnade's contribution to rhino breeding continues. The park still keeps a pair of Indian rhinos which



Part of Whipsnade's White Rhinoceros herd

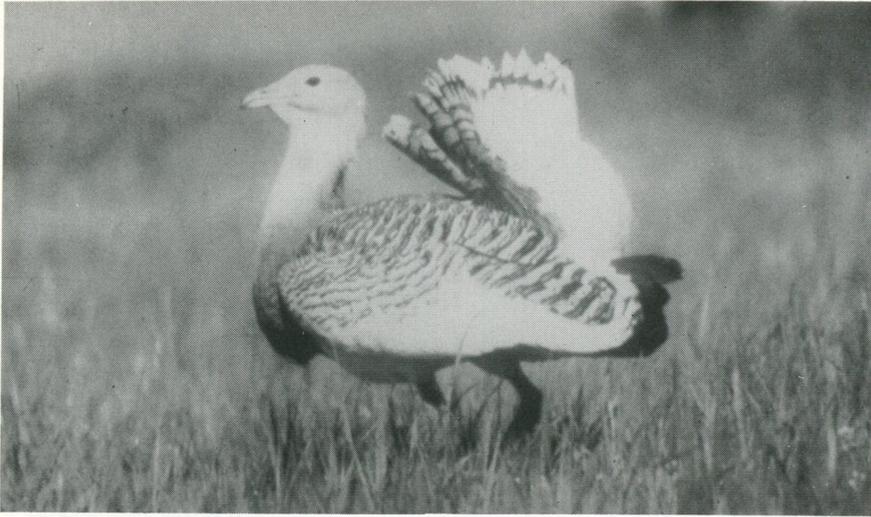
breed regularly, and nine white rhinos with 39 offspring born to date, the latest two over Christmas 1990. Only three of the 14 British institutions holding white rhinos regularly breed this species. Now there are moves to produce a larger-scale black rhino breeding centre at Whipsnade to bring together a number of the animals in the U.K. into a research centre. This has been made possible by recent successes in breeding which resulted from a management initiative to move breeding males (including a Whipsnade animal) to non-breeding locations.

Conservation breeding of birds is undertaken largely behind the scenes. The Society has two main areas of interest at Whipsnade, cranes and bustards. Many of the rare or endangered cranes in the U.K. came through Whipsnade breeding programmes. Whipsnade organises regional co-ordination and the setting up of new systems of management. The bustard programme is based around the great bustard (*Otis tarda*) in co-operation with the Great Bustard Trust, with a view to establishing a captive breeding system for the species as a model for

future reintroduction into Britain. A centre is planned at Whipsnade to promote international conservation of bustards and the setting up of a secretariat to help implement a management plan for the species in Europe under the Bonn Convention. Specialised breeding facilities will be attached to this to develop innovative incubation and rearing techniques. Any reintroduced population would need to be managed, and there may well have to be a continued input from captive breeding to ensure the long-term survival of this magnificent bird.

A recent innovation is a public bird exhibit which allows us to maintain full-winged vultures in an open system without aviary netting and feather-clipping them on a regular basis. Not only has this improved the viewing of the birds, but the breeding of the first Ruppell's griffon vulture (*Gyps rueppellii*) in this country was achieved within a month of carrying out this trial.

Keeping birds of prey in cage environments has led to criticism in recent times. By providing a bird demonstration using falconry and other



A Great Bustard at Whipsnade

techniques we present the birds in a very active and dynamic way. The activity is good for the birds' welfare, and people's perception of what we are doing is greatly enhanced. It is an opportunity to formally educate the public about the conservation of these species and their biology.

The Institute of Zoology's activities at Whipsnade take place primarily through the Veterinary Department and the Department of Physiological Ecology. A new educational programme is being set up for the training of wildlife veterinarians primarily from the Third World. The department's considerable base of experience of working with a wide range of Asian, African and other stock kept in semi-natural conditions enables techniques which are applicable to field situations to be carried out in a controlled manner. For people who will be working with animals in the wild, it is a significant advantage to be able to gain the necessary practical experience without taking chances. This programme will take place in new facilities built for veterinary staff, which include lecture rooms, a library and on-site accommodation.

Whipsnade still maintains free-ranging species utilising the full 600 acres of parkland, and this, although it restricts the amount of garden development that is possible, is greatly appreciated by the public and helps to enhance the atmosphere of freedom so characteristic of the park. This is important, considering the confinement within which most people in the south-east of Britain live. The species involved include Chinese water deer, muntjac, mara, wallabies, peacocks, storks and waterfowl, and it is not unusual for the odd ruminant to hop out of its paddock and give birth in a quiet corner of the park, returning some months later with its young to rejoin the herd.

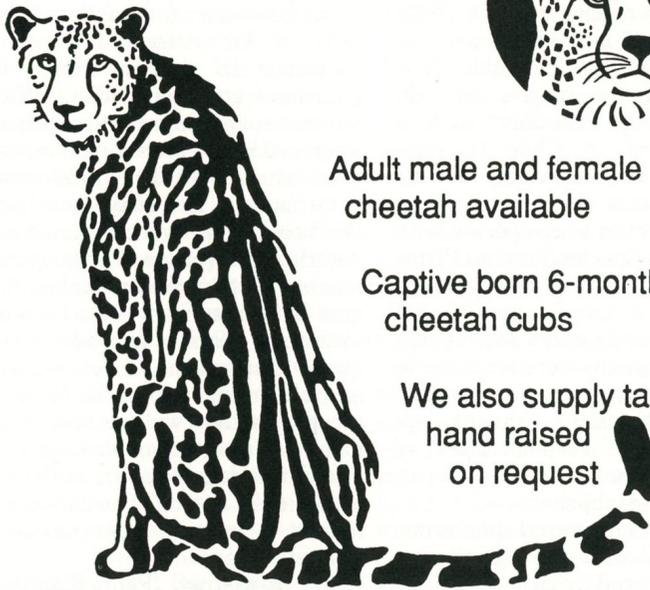
All the changes and new ideas have been initiated with an animal staff of only 34 and over 3,000 animals to cater for. A new management team with expertise from other areas has helped to ensure that changes have gone smoothly, and a 20 per cent increase in public attendance in the first full year demonstrates its effectiveness. With such a valuable asset and such excellent potential, further developments are planned over the

next two or three years. Whipsnade will then approach the year 2000 with a magnificent collection of animals presented in an innovative and educational way. The keeping of these rare and precious creatures in captivity is not taken for granted, and the staff are dedicated to ensuring that their welfare is a priority. The purpose of

their presence here is to ensure their future existence, whether it be through direct means or indirectly through conservation education.

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