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NEWS

Texas zookeeper keeps bird friends in feed, feathers

Associated Press

FORT WORTH — Not everyone can talk to a swan or a cockatoo and have it pay attention.

But when Ronald Kimbell tells Tornado the swan to straighten up and fly, the creature lifts his graceful head to the sky and croons like a folk singer.

Gossips at the Fort Worth Zoo have long maintained that Cookie the Cockatoo is madly in love with Kimbell and shamelessly ignores her mate to flirt with him whenever he's in the neighborhood.

Kimbell has a way with birds. As supervisor of the zoo's bird department, he is responsible for keeping nearly 400 birds well-fed and feathered.

It's a job that has changed markedly since Kimbell joined the zoo as a high school graduate more than 20 years ago.

"I was looking for a temporary job," Kimbell said. Except for a two-year stint in the Army, the Fort Worth Zoo has been his only employer. He is a bachelor and has devoted his life to the art.

These days, a person would have a hard time getting a job at the zoo without a college degree in the field, Kimbell said.

"But when I started I'd never worked with birds before and I'd never studied them," he said. "I've taught myself as I went along and learned from experience. Sometimes experience is the best way to learn about birds."

There have been many changes in the way birds are cared for since Kimbell started at the zoo.

"The techniques have changed," he said. "We have better foods and medical care. Also many of the birds used to be so easy to get, we didn't worry when one of them died. Now some birds are so rare, you'd better really take care of them."

Kimbell still mourns the loss of 177 birds that died Christmas Eve in 1983 when the birdhouse at the zoo burned down. Some of them were rare and some on the endangered species list.

"We had 10 Bali mynas in the birdhouse that we hoped to release back into the wilds of Bali," Kimbell said. The endangered mynas were part of a breeding program at the zoo.

Along with many other zoos in this country and around the world, the Fort Worth Zoo regards propagation of rare and endangered species as one of its major functions.

"Zoos working together may be the best hope some of these animals have," Kimbell said. "A lot of our purpose is to propagate and release back into the wild. Unfortunately, in some cases, there is no wild to release back into, so zoos are trying to help some of these species survive in captivity at least."

Fortunately, not all the Fort Worth Zoo's breeding programs were damaged severely by the fire. Many birds were housed in other cages or in the large outdoor aviary.

"Right now, we have 44 roseate spoonbills, and we just shipped 12 to Walt Disney World," he said. "Normally, zoos breed the ones they're the best at breeding, and then we

swap around with each other. We're getting some scarlet ibis back to our spoonbills."

The spoonbill breeding program has been so successful that it generated a Silver Propagation Award given by the American Association for Zoological Parks and Aquariums in recognition of 25 successful nestings.

"Our spoonbills are really in demand," Kimbell said.

But for Fort Worth's zoo to become one of the leaders in the field of bird propagation, a new indoor aviary is vital, he added. Plans were being drawn for one before the fire.

The projected aviary would cost more than \$3 million, said Ed Turner, director of the zoo. Funding has been sought from some of Fort Worth's major foundations.

"Right now we don't know where we stand," Turner said. "We were told that no funding was available last year, but we were asked to reapply this year. That's what we did, but we haven't heard anything yet."

As envisioned by Turner and Kimbell, the new aviary would be a state-of-the-art facility that would make Fort Worth one of the three leading zoos in the country where major exhibit areas represent four climatic zones: tropics, swamps, pine and savannah. Birds indigenous to each area would be shown. But the facility also would overcome some of the propagation obstacles now faced by Kimbell and his seven-person staff.

"Some birds need a natural habitat setting in which to breed," Kimbell explained. "For example, some tropical birds need a certain amount of humidity before they'll mate. In the tropics, the rainy season indicates to them that there will be enough food for their young."

Thanks to much research, zoos now have a far better understanding of how to get birds to breed than they did 20 years ago, Kimbell said.

"It used to be that zoos didn't want birds raised in captivity, because they didn't think they would breed," Kimbell said. "Now we know that these birds often are better breeders because they are calmer in a zoo setting."

Imprinting is another problem that has been overcome. Imprinting is the tendency of a young animal to decide that it is the species that first sees, and birds are particularly prone to it. If a newly hatched bird first lays eyes on a human, upon reaching adulthood, it's likely to display mating behavior toward a favorite zookeeper while ignoring those of its own kind. Obviously, this can thwart most breeding programs.

"The Bronx Zoo has developed an effective way to deal with imprinting in those cases where the adult bird can't or won't take care of the young," Kimbell said. "They use hand puppets of birds when working with the babies."

"It's a problem because we're trying to get her to mate, but whenever I'm around, all she wants is for me to scratch her tongue."

Kimbell deals with this misplaced love by avoiding the cockatoo most of the time.

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