

Extreme Close-Ups

Activities offer personal encounters with nature

by Laura Ellis, Media Relations Manager

It's 11 a.m. on a Wednesday, and a small crowd has gathered in the National Aviary's Tropical Forest exhibit. Trainer Andy Kemerer is carefully balancing pans bearing the avian equivalent of a Big Mac and a shake — hundreds of fat, wriggling mealworms and a mound of carefully halved grapes. He gathers the guests together, offering basic feeding instructions and pointing out the species names of the birds that are excitedly dipping and swooping overhead.

Andy asks for a volunteer to start things off, and three young boys eagerly scoop up some worms. Following instructions to hold their palms flat, they stretch out their hands. In a flash, a Golden-breasted Starling with gleaming, iridescent blue and purple feathers flies down and lands on one of the boys' hands. Delightedly, he and the crowd watch as the bird delicately snatches and swallows three worms before casually flying off to observe from a tree branch above.

Not to be outdone, a girl steps forward, and holds a worm overhead. A blur of wings and the worm is gone, taken by a Carmine Bee-eater, an extremely agile bird that in the wild catches insects in mid-air. "That was *sooo* cool!" the girl exclaims to her mom.

There are three feeding times daily, at 11:00 a.m., 2:00 p.m. and 3:00 p.m. These close encounters are among the many interactive activities happening daily at the National Aviary.

"We are committed to developing new programs that give our guests a truly memorable experience with nature," says Linda Dickerson, National Aviary CEO. "Our goal is to become a place where guests of all ages are not passive observers, but instead are connecting with our birds in a special way. We want people to leave having had a true encounter with nature that inspires an enhanced respect for birds and for all living things."

If you're visiting the Aviary on a fine day, your first up-close and personal



Photo © Ben Bonilla, Golden Image Photography

The younger set meets an African Penguin during *Penguin & Me*.

encounter will likely involve an enthusiastic greeting — from a duck. Thanks to a generous grant from the Dominion Foundation, the entrance to the Aviary is now graced with a lovely pond that features a bubbling fountain and water bird sculpture. Beginning this summer, the *Winged Waters*

pond will be a space for Heidi, Helga, Pippi, Mattie and Gertie, the Aviary's friendly Runner Ducks, and Puddles, a Muscovy Duck, to swim, play and act as an official welcoming committee.

Once inside, you'll have the opportunity to learn more about the lives and natural history of some of the Aviary's more spectacular residents through *Aviary Insights*, a new program of daily talks. Learn about the Rhinoceros Hornbill's remarkable nesting habits, find out what makes the truly massive Steller's Sea Eagle such a tremendous hunter, and discover how in the wild, the Keel-billed Toucan's eating habits help to seed the forest.

If you are one of the many people with a passion for Penguins, then it's time to sign up for *Penguin Connection* (ages 6 and up) or *Penguin & Me*



National Aviary Photo

Trainer Andy Kemerer shares treats like live insects and worms, for visitors to feed to the birds.

(for the younger set ages 18 months to five years of age). The private, small group setting of these programs provides guests with an unforgettable visit with one of the Aviary's mischievous African Penguins. You'll learn about the attributes that make penguins unique among birds, and best of all, you'll have the chance to watch the penguins play. Small children can participate in a craft activity and even dress up as a penguin. Both programs can be sold out far in advance, so place your reservations now for late summer and fall openings.

The summer months mean that the roses are in bloom in the Aviary's historic garden, and it also means that it's time for one of the Aviary's most breathtaking presentations, *Wings of the World*. During this outdoor free-flight show, more than a dozen magnificent birds, many of which are critically endangered in the wild, display rarely seen natural behaviors. Join the audience and you'll experience the truly hair-raising sight of a Eurasian Eagle Owl gliding silently toward you, golden eyes fixed in a penetrating stare. You'll witness the wondrous sight of a flock of Scarlet Macaws flying in jet fighter formation among the trees, and you'll marvel at vultures and other raptors, each perfectly designed for hunting and capturing prey. A few old favorites will return from last year's show, including ravens, crows, and parrots with a talent for mimicry.

Wings of the World takes place Wednesday through Sunday, 11:30 a.m. and 2:30 p.m., weather permitting, from June 2nd

through July 13 and July 16 through Labor Day.

This summer also marks one of the most exciting new developments at the National Aviary. On July 7th, the National Aviary will open *Lories & Friends*, a free-flight, walk-through exhibit that will be inhabited by a flock of brilliantly hued Rainbow Lorikeets. Guests will have the opportunity

to feed nectar to the Lorikeets, a species well known for friendliness and curiosity. So relaxed are these colorful birds that it's not unusual to see them perching on a guest's shoulder, arm or hand. Their cheerful personalities and boldly marked blue, green, red and yellow feathers make them irresistible to both children and adults, and they are sure to be among the

most popular residents when they arrive at the National Aviary this summer.

If a quieter experience is more to your taste, then plan your visit around the daily 3:30 p.m. rainstorm in the Wetlands of the Americas exhibit. Relax on a bench and enjoy the sights and sounds of the birds enjoying their bath as the afternoon winds to a close. You'll

hear spirited vocalizations, and if you sit long enough, you'll have the opportunity to spot the more than 100 birds that make their home in this space. Take a moment to find Dexter, the Brown Pelican, and his best friend Esther, a black Cormorant. Joannie, the Wattled Curassow, will likely come over to check you out as you sit, while the Inca Terns search for leftovers among the food pans and the ever-graceful Flamingos settle down for the day.

With so much to do, be sure to plan for a full day at the National Aviary. And remember to call ahead or log on to our website, www.aviary.org, for the latest schedule of activities.



National Aviary Photo by Nicole Begley

A Hooded Vulture flies in the Rose Garden during *Wings of the World*.



Photo by Jason Davis / Tampa's Lowry Park Zoo

Rainbow Lorikeets land at the National Aviary in July.



Photo © Steve Shaluta

A Carmine Bee-eater waits for a tasty tidbit.

