
“Our Zoo News”

and Guide.

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CHESTER ZOOLOGICAL GARDENS.

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We must apologise to subscribers for the delay in issuing this Zoo News, but for the past two months we have been exceptionally busy and it has been impossible to find time to write any articles. Record numbers of visitors came to the Zoo over the Easter and Whitsun Holidays and the sun shone brightly practically the whole of the time. One of the biggest attractions on Easter Monday was a baby black and white goat which was born that morning. Another favourite with the children was a baby Soay lamb then a few days old. During the two holiday week-ends, Molly the Elephant was as popular as ever and gave thousands of children rides, as did the Zoo donkeys.

Perhaps the greatest crowd was to be found around the Polar Bear pit and the Sea-Lion pool. The Polar Bears thoroughly entertained the public with their aquatic displays and they caused shrieks of laughter by playing ball with the visitors. Rack

and Ruin have a wooden ball about the size of a football and they will play with this for hours on end throwing it so high in the air that it very often goes over the top of their enclosure, both to the bears' and the visitors' enjoyment.

The feeding of the Sea-Lions, which takes place hourly in the afternoon, always attracts huge crowds for these animals are well worth watching as they skim the water at an absolutely amazing pace, and Sammy the bull Sea-Lion draws much applause from the crowds when he clambers up on top of the rocks at the end of the pool and catches the fish thrown to him by his keeper usually with unerring success.

Susy, one of the cow Sea-Lions caused some consternation one morning when her Keeper found that she was missing. However, as the lake surrounding the water-fowl island seemed the most

likely place where she might be, we went to search there, and sure enough in the middle of the lake, having the time of her life was Susy. She evidently considered that a swimming pool to herself was a wonderful luxury, and it took her quite a while to decide whether the new pool or the herrings held temptingly by her keeper were the most attractive. Fortunately the herrings won, and Susy was persuaded to flop along the paths back to her real home following a herring just held tantalizingly out of reach. Although so graceful in the water, on land a Sea-Lion is one of the most awkward looking creatures imaginable, and Susy flapping along the ground back to her home was a most amusing, but ungainly sight.

Some of the Zoo's latest arrivals, four Black-footed Penguins have excited much interest. These animals arrived on the Sunday morning before Easter, having journeyed from Johannesburg to Chester Zoo in thirty-six hours. Early on the morning following their arrival, we were very astonished to receive a visit from a lady who brought back a Penguin which she had found wandering around her garden and she informed us that there was another Penguin in a neighbour's garden, so we hastened to collect the truant. Apparently these two birds had managed to squeeze through the palings of the fence surrounding their home, and had decided to investigate their new surroundings. It certainly must have been a most amazing sight to see two penguins taking an early morning walk in the village before breakfast.

We have just obtained a large collection of rabbits which we are sure will appeal greatly to our very small visitors. Another crocodile is the most recent addition to the Reptile House. The crocodile enclosure with its tropical vegetation is now looking very well and is most popular with visitors, arousing much favourable comment.

The Reptile House.

Many visitors ask questions about our Reptile House and never a day goes by without someone enquiring about one or more of its fascinating inmates. So we hope below to take the reader on a walk round the building and at the same time to try to give you an idea of its structure and the reptiles it houses.

The Reptile House was first opened to the public in July, 1948, and since then it has steadily gained in popularity and is now one of the Zoo's greatest attractions.

It is built of large rough sandy coloured stone with a corrugated perspex roof, and is situated just to the left of the Sea-Lion Pool banked on one side by a well-bedded border of everchanging flowers and on the other side by the "Beaver Lodge" and pool.

One of the most exciting things about this walk is that the visitors have to look for the exhibits who live in as natural surroundings as it is possible to give them in captivity. In most cases in the wilds, reptiles colours blend in with their surroundings making it difficult to find them, and so if you think a show case is empty look again, carefully.

On entering the Turnstile we look down a large flagged stone floored corridor and see that the Reptiles in their large spacious cases are all in the centre of the building and that we, the visitors walk round them on the outside, separated from them by what appears to be only a pane of glass, but don't get alarmed, it is not the same glass as that in the kitchen windows, but the strong armour-plated bullet proof type which was used so effectively by our troops in wartime, so there is no danger of anything breaking out.

On entering the corridor we come to the first case and the notice reads GREEN MAMBA (*Dendroaspis viridis*). This case looks like a birds eye view of a forest glade, there's a tiny tree, its long spiral branches standing out grim and black against the light gold and blue walls, and a lobelia plant overhangs a shallow crystal clear pool behind which a few large stones are cleverly arranged to form a rocky background. Round the edge of the pool a few blades of delicate grass mingle with the rough leaves of the rambling wild creepers. The Mamba is generally entwined somewhere in the tree and is the easiest of all our reptiles to find on account of its brilliant colouring. This snake is found in the high forests of West Africa, and is about six feet in length and about one inch thick. Its colour is a soft velvet green and its tail trails off into a limey greenish yellow, the tiny scales being tipped with black which gives it the appearance of plaited raffia.

There is nothing about this harmless looking snake to suggest danger, and we notice that the children always linger outside its case. However the Green Mamba is one of the deadly poisonous variety and is certainly not the meek little creature it looks, on the contrary it is most aggressive. The deadly venom is found at the base of the needle sharp fangs on the lower jaw, and the action is rather like that of a hypodermic needle, as the poison shoots into the victim as soon as its jaws close. According to medical authorities the poison affects the action of the heart and causes paralysis. However, there is no danger of anyone getting bitten here. If you look closely at the rocky section of the case you will see a small closed trap door; this leads into another smaller inner compartment and the Mamba is always safely behind this locked door before anyone ventures into his show case.

On leaving the little Mamba we come to the loveliest of the snake cases. To look at it one would think it was a small sunken garden. There is a clear fringed pool, a carpet of sun warmed

green moss and a tiny little tropical bottle green shrub with its shiny round orange berries looking just like an orange tree. On one side of the pool a large splendid showy ornamental foliage plant known as Coleus stands, its big leaves a mixture of green, pink, mauve and vivid blues, look as if a fairy artist had been at work with a paint box, and it has a long fluffy tower of tiny blue flowers climbing up towards the glass roof. On the other side a long delicate fern sweeps over the pool. This is the home of the dreaded poisonous Gaboon Viper which like the Mamba belongs to the deadly poisonous family. This snake is difficult to see on account of its colouring. It is a larger and thicker snake than the Mamba and has a large triangular ugly head, and its colour is made up of diamond shaped patterns in red and yellowish browns. When it first casts its skin the Gaboon Viper is quite pretty, but as a rule it lies coiled up as it is now under the coleus and unless one looks very carefully they might miss seeing it as it so seldom moves.

Leaving the Gaboon Vipers' case we move on to the star turn of the Reptile House. It is the Chameleon, and there is always a crowd of visitors jostling for a closer view of this peculiar little creature. This reptile belongs to a group of its own, and although at a first glance you may think it belongs to the Lizard family, it has no connection at all with this group. Somehow this odd little reptile looks as if it might have dropped straight out of a lost world.

One of the strangest things about it is its large bulging eyes and it is able to use one eye independently of the other and so can look forward, backwards, up and down and round about, all at the same time. It has a long prehensile tail, and feet which are also adapted for grasping. The Chameleon lives in a little world of its own. Its show case has as many coloured plants and shrubs as we can get into it so that visitors will have the chance to see the Chameleon change its colour. This little reptile is defenceless and depends entirely

on its environment for protection, so one day it might be brown to match the branch on which he is lying, and yet again it might be green to match the foliage, and then it might be multi-coloured like the leaves of the tall Coleus. To-day it is vivid green and the only thing alive about it are its strange eyes, one of which it keeps rolling slowly backwards and forwards. The other eye is focused on to a fly which is resting on a leaf higher up the branch. Slowly and very deliberately the little green fellow moves forward and when quite a distance from the fly, a tremendous long tongue shoots out as quick as lightning, and the fly has gone. This tongue is another of the peculiar things about the Chameleon; it is an enormous length and is covered with a sticky secretion, and once it has touched its victim, the tongue rolls back into the mouth as quickly as it shot out. It is all over in a flash and the astonished visitors gaze fascinated as the Chameleon repeats this breath-taking performance.

The next case presents quite a different scene; it looks like a bit of scrub land with a clear pool, a black withered tree, some rocks and lots of sand and gravel. This is where the last of our poisonous snakes lives, namely the black Cobra, and you will probably find him coiled up on the sandy gravel or stretched motionless across the roof of his case, inky black in the sunshine. On the other hand you might just be lucky enough to catch this deadly coal-black reptile in action. It will be gliding silently over the rocks in its case, its shiny black scales glittering in the sunlight and its tiny beady eyes full of hatred, and should the Cobra be feeling really angry it will slither up to the highest rock and then rear slowly up and up, its loathsome head swaying as if to some native pipe music while the neck expands into the flat hood and then it strikes (at nothing of course) hissing horribly while its wicked black forked tongue darts in and out very quickly. All this is alright when the creature is safely behind glass but no one would feel half as brave if they were to meet the Cobra out in the wilds of West Africa where it is found. Visitors will notice when the Cobra is rearing off the ground

that the under surface of the snake is a bright yellow, and we are told that the fierce looking creature does not attack unless provoked, and only expands its hood when excited or alarmed. Cobras are about six feet in length and as thick as a man's wrist.

After this display the Cobra curls up and we pass on to a large sandy case, a typical desert scene, sand, bare rocks and a shallow strip of water. This is the home of three large Monitor Lizards; at first glance the visitors might be inclined to mistake them for small crocodiles, but as one of them is usually up the tree which stands near the edge of the water, the visitor naturally realizes that they can't be crocodiles. These creatures are prettily marked in green and yellow and have very long powerful tails which give them a dragonlike appearance. These tails are used to propel them along when swimming and as a weapon of defence on land. A lash from a Monitor's tail I am sure would be most painful. Apart from their tails they are quite harmless and live well on eggs, meat and vegetables in captivity. They have long forked white tongues which they can jerk in and out with amazing rapidity, which unwary insects know to their cost. Our particular specimens are known as Nile Monitors and are found all over Africa.

Leaving the Nile Monitors we pass on to the next case which has rather more stones heaped around than the last, and a bough of a tree leaning over the short clipped grass. If you look carefully you will see among the smooth stones two snakes coiled up together, they are pythons or rock snakes. One of them is the youngest and smallest African python we possess and the other is known as a Royal python and has a very pretty colouring forming a clear pattern of buff, dark brown, and white. Both these snakes are natives of West Africa and are of a non-poisonous group and as far as human life is concerned they are not considered dangerous. They live mostly on small birds and vermin wrapping themselves round their prey in coils. They devour their victims, like their more

dangerous poisonous relations, head first, entirely whole.

In the wilds the Pythons live amongst the trees near water; they are very powerful swimmers and both our African and Indian pythons spend quite a lot of their time in their pools. Leaving the rock snakes, the visitor will I am sure stop to gasp in amazement at the next window. It is the first view we have of one side of the tropical pool and garden which is the home of our alligators and crocodiles. Gazing in at the gorgeous plants, with very little imagination, the visitor is easily transplanted to the much read about equatorial lands where the sun is always shining. Rough stones form a tiny bridge over a lazy still deep green pool and massive pink geraniums intermingled with the blue flowers and multicoloured leaves of the Coleus climb riotously upwards towards the glass roof like the magic Beanstalk of the fairy tale, while creepers sprawl madly over the old stone work, but from this side there is usually no sign of animal life. Leaving the garden we pass on to a case which is devoid of all plant life. There is nothing but sand, bare rocks, and a shallow dusty pool. Here tortoises of all sizes and shapes lie about and bask in the heat. There's the Grecian Tortoise which has its home in Greece and sunny Italy and therefore revels in the heat. The colour of its shell is a brown and olive tinge, dotted here and there with yellow and black. Then there is the hinged Tortoise of Tropical Africa, so called because the carapace or shell has a hinged type of structure. These slow timid creatures live happily in the soft warm sand and thrive well on raw meat, eggs, and green vegetables. They have a companion who is very active, it is another Monitor Lizard but is one of a group found in India and has not the colourings of its African cousins. It is much smaller in size and is a soft sandy colour and this particular one is a

very friendly little fellow, and generally spends quite a lot of its time, clambering on the back of one of the sleeping tortoises trying to scale the glass window.

Leaving the tortoises and the Monitor we pause in front of the last case on this side of the Reptile House. This particular case always looks hot and steamy, even the pool looks warm and there is always a lot of thick clammy black soil and a thin tree with lots of long branches. Here are found two slender tree snakes from Tropical Africa known as Boomslangs. One of them is a vivid emerald green while the other is a sort of fawnish brown. Found over the greater part of tropical and South Africa, this little snake is poisonous, but does not have any serious effects.

Turning the corner we stop at the first of the next three large windows which look on to the Crocodile pool and garden. The alligator is usually basking in the sun under one of the tropical palm trees near the water, while the crocodiles lie like logs in the deep still waters of the miniature green lagoon. The whole place is a blaze of brilliant colour. The scarlet and blue fuchias hang their heads and are an excellent foil for the paler coloured petunias. Begonias mingle with the deep sapphire blue of the lobelia and down one side of the enclosure is a mass of pink geraniums.

The Nile Crocodile is found throughout Africa and is hunted by certain native tribes for its flesh which is rather like fish. They are of course a menace to the natives, being partial to human flesh, their savage powerful jaws making them a formidable foe.

The Alligator comes from the Mississippi and is found in the swamp lands of the Southern States and is slightly larger and broader than the crocodile.

Both the crocodiles and the alligator live very well on raw horse flesh in captivity. The alligators' main diet in its native haunts is fish.

Passing the Tropical Garden the visitors pass on to a large show case with short clipped grass and a large clear pool. This is the home of the largest of our reptiles and the only one of the python family which might prove dangerous to human beings. It is a seventeen foot African Python, and believe me you don't have to look very far to find him; usually he is coiled up quite still, but should he be on the move visitors just glance warily at the case and pass on.

Moving quickly past the African Python we stop to look in the next glass-screened case and see two more of the Python Family. They are large Indian Pythons but compared to the big fellow next door they are quite handsome creatures. In colour they are a light beige brown with reddish markings, but in habits they resemble their African cousins; these two seem far more energetic than the African rock snakes, and one of them is always on the move.

Next we have rather a surprise, the same scene meets our eye, the delicate green grass, the tumbling stones, and the clear pool of water, but there is no snake, instead we see two baby sleepy crocodiles, not more than about twelve inches in length.

Leaving the youngsters we reach the last show case in the Reptile House and pause to watch the oldest reptile at Chester Zoo. It is a beautifully marked Boa Constrictor. It is about ten feet in length and is a light brown with dark brown markings in stripes across its back, while along its sides there are a series of large brown circles with light-centres, the markings on the tail are a reddish brown, and on the head there is a black crescent-shape mark. The whole colour scheme tones with the bark on the tropical trees found in the dense forests of South America. Visitors will always find this snake coiled round the branch of the tree in the centre of its woodland home. Like the Pythons it feeds on small animals and birds.

Nothing much seems to be known about its breeding habits. The natives consider its flesh a great delicacy, and its skin is used for decorating saddles and other leatherwork. This beautiful snake found in the Tropical forests of South America does not bother to attack man or any of the larger animals, although a very large one could probably kill a deer. Our Boa is always ready for a meal of eggs.

Leaving the Boa Constrictor we pass out of the Reptile House and find ourselves opposite the Flamingo Pool. We hope that you have enjoyed walking round and that we have been able to answer a few of your questions, about all the reptiles.

