

'WORLD OF BIRDS' WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

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The development and activities of the 'World of Birds' Wildlife Sanctuary, near Cape Town, are described. The educational role of the sanctuary is discussed and future plans outlined.

INTRODUCTION

Very few people would have thought that the *World of Birds Wildlife Sanctuary* in Hout Bay would become the largest bird park in Africa, and one of the few very large ones in the world, within just 12 years. The location was carefully chosen at a time when the project was no more than a dream. It had to be a place where the surroundings were naturally beautiful and located where it could easily be reached by visitors. There was a need for the creation of such a park, with wildlife ever further removed from city people by 'urban sprawl'. Contrary to popular suggestions, the general public should not be encouraged to go out into the wild to look for birds and animals. The disturbance would drive wildlife even further away from us and inhibit breeding. The safety valve which a park like the World of Birds or a modern-concept zoo presents is invaluable. Capetonians and visitors alike enjoy the scenic drive from the City over Llandudno to Hout Bay, and from there either to return via Constantia or continue along Chapman's Peak to Noordhoek and Simonstown, or Kommetjie and Cape Point. (See Figure 1).

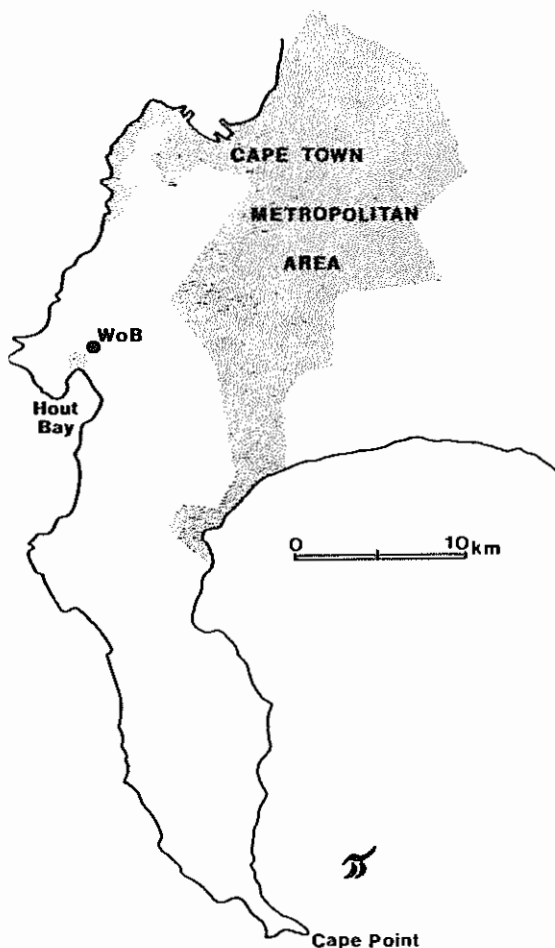


FIGURE 1 The location of World of Birds on the Cape Peninsula.

Visitors approaching the park for the first time can hardly imagine that behind the narrow belt bordering onto Valley Road lies a landscaped magic world spread over four ha on a gentle slope towards the Apostles mountain range connected to Table Mountain. 12 years ago there were only Port Jackson willows (*Acacia saligna*) growing where the World of Birds is now established. For the first six years there were no financial resources at all and every day depended upon a miracle. Determination and a belief in the worthiness of the project made it possible. The greatest handicap was the acceptance of sick and injured birds which necessitated the park incorporating a wild bird and animal hospital. For nine years this service was rendered and up to 300 birds and animals in need of help were cared for each month. When the financial burden threatened the closure of the park, this service had to be discontinued. No official appreciation and encouragement had ever been received. On the contrary, the Wildlife Sanctuary had a continual fight against officialdom which wanted to see it closed. Happily this situation is now a thing of the past.

A UNIQUE CONCEPT

The concept of the World of Birds is unique in allowing the interaction of birds, animals, plants and people within over 100 landscaped large *walk-through aviaries*. A new concept in the educational presentation of birds has been pioneered by allowing the public to be *inside aviaries with the birds* instead of being on the outside looking in through dividing wire-mesh. It has been thought that if birds were inside a small aviary they would quickly become tame by being close to people and that birds inside a large aviary would always be at the far end to hide away from the public. But the contrary applies: wild birds in small aviaries feel trapped and rarely become tame, while those inside a large area feel secure in the knowledge that they can always 'get away' and consequently become tame very quickly. The idea for this concept was born out of a personal need and has its source in my childhood. Never having been without birds like jackdaws, crows, kestrels, owls and buzzards, I never enjoyed looking at birds through wire and being separated from them. Either the birds would be free with me in the garden or I would sit inside the small aviary to be close to them. Where most people enjoy going out into the wild to watch birds from afar with binoculars, I felt the need to be intimately close and to establish personal relationships. Much was learned at an early age in this way, and the need for being close to birds and animals has always remained with me.

The present facilities of the Wildlife Sanctuary comprise over 100 aviaries, most of them walk-through. Some sections are not on view to the public in order to allow for undisturbed breeding. A marmoset/tamarin complex is also off-exhibit to protect these very rare and delicate little monkeys from exposure to human diseases. The park also incorporates a 'wild bird sanctuary' where birds are free to come and go as they please - mostly birds which have been bred inside the aviaries and released to fly at liberty. In this way a breeding colony of cattle egrets has been established which breeds all year round.

The number of full-time staff stands now at 20. By 1986 the number of visitors had reached 100 000 and this number is expected to rise as the development of the park progresses. More visitors mean more income and more money means continued progress.

One of the main aims of the World of Birds is the breeding of birds. All birds (whether they are of monetary value or not) are presented in as natural a way as possible and housed in such a way that propagation is stimulated. Only in this way can the display become educational. The motto has always been to give the birds as much as we can at all times to make life with us in a protective environment as worthwhile as possible. This principle works by giving visitors maximum enjoyment, and much of the income is derived from people who return again and again without tiring of the experience. Every visit is a new experience. Not all birds can be seen at any one visit; there is also a difference as to what can be seen according to the time of day as well as the time of year. Even the rapidly growing luxurious vegetation makes every new visit different, quite apart from the developments which are continually taking place.

EDUCATIONAL FACILITIES

At present the educational facilities at the park are very limited and are mainly restricted to visual impact. Many problems are encountered which can only be overcome with time. One example is the identification plaques for the birds on view. Only pictures hand-painted on perspex are suitable and so far it has not been possible to find a person keen enough to persevere with this task.

There are many plans for the future. The most important one will be a classroom to prepare school children with lectures before viewing the birds. Such a room would also serve as an information centre and could be used for adult and family education. It is hoped that such a building would be sponsored. An Education Officer will be appointed in due course and a youth club is planned to cater for different age groups. A training programme for persons who wish to learn about the management of birds and small animals in captivity is being considered as it is difficult to find employees with previous experience in this field in South Africa.

The main thrust of the educational facilities will be oriented towards family involvement. Children receive most of their lasting knowledge and impressions at an early age from their parents and it is therefore important to subtly introduce adults to conservation awareness. The Education Officer would also have to plan and provide additional information at strategic points throughout the park to assist visitors in familiarizing themselves with the value of our wildlife. Even visitors who come to the World of Birds purely for entertainment cannot fail to gain lasting impressions by being intimately close to birds. How can one create concern for, let us say, the Cape Vulture (*Gyps coprotheres*) if people have never seen what such a bird looks like? Having seen one may mean becoming involved, and the seed towards conservation may have been sown.

For the time being the benefit for school outings will be mainly visual education. We would like to see everybody regarding the visit and the closeness to the confiding birds as a privilege. No shows are given and strict rules must be observed to make the visit profitable and enjoyable for everybody. When schools arrive, the children are broken up into small groups of 10 to 12 individuals who must stay close together under the supervision of a teacher or accompanying adult. They are supplied with written rules which are read to them before being allowed to proceed.

For the past nine years World of Birds has published a monthly Newsletter which is sold at the kiosk. It is also posted to members of the World of Birds, together with a membership card in appreciation for donations and to keep friends informed about what is happening from month to month at the park.

CONCLUSION

World of Birds is a private enterprise and as such is able to make immediate decisions in all fields. Being individually owned, it is not subject to partners wanting to see money in their pockets. So far all income is immediately spent on improvements, bearing in mind that getting bigger does not necessarily mean getting better. Getting bigger *and* better can only be achieved with dedicated, interested, involved staff. So far the lack of involvement by suitable staff has been the most limiting factor in the growth of the park.

What does the future look like? We would like to become further involved in the breeding and conservation of rare and endangered birds and small mammals, and some new projects are already under way. More aviaries are being constructed to allow for more breeding and old aviaries will be reconstructed and improved. With natural timber walls, rock-faces and waterfalls we aim to eliminate the visually unpleasant wire-partitions as much as possible. Tropical houses will be constructed. A new food kitchen, bird hospital, incubator room, brooder room, live food propagation room, staff room, cool room and workshop will have to be added. And, as a service to the public as well as adding to the income, tea garden facilities have become an absolute necessity.

What a privilege it is to be able to view 3 000 birds of over 350 different species from all parts of the world within a few hours! Even if one had the time and the money to travel the world, there would be no guarantee of seeing birds the way they can be seen at the World of Birds. There the birds, without fear of humans, behave just as they would in the wild: they feed, sing, display, build nests, incubate, feed chicks - and even fight. What we have to offer here in Hout Bay, just outside Cape Town, is something very precious.



FIGURE 2

Inside the World of Birds.