



Avicultural Society of New South Wales Inc. (ASNSW) (Founded in 1940 as the Parrot & African Lovebird Society of Australia)

Taronga Bird Festival 2014 – A Celebration of Birds!

Presented by Michael Shiels

For those of you who don't know me, my name is Michael Shiels. I'm from [Taronga Zoo](#) and a member of the Society. A Couple of years ago one of the ASNSW members Nick Atchison joined us at Taronga from the [Alice Springs Desert Park](#). Nick brought a great idea with him from the bird park and that was to have a [Bird Festival](#) at the zoo to increase the buzz about birds. Nick and the interpretation officer Stephen Williams put a lot of effort into making it happen at Taronga

It is my impression, and I guess the impression of a lot of people, that in a zoo environment bird collections are slowly declining. We are trying to change things and we are trying to do things which will maybe increase the scope of people who like birds. Even though they say that bird watching is the second most common interest in the world (or something like that), in a zoo you have got to compete with mega faun like elephants and lions and tigers.

One of the discussions that I have had with various key people in the zoo is that you don't really notice the birds until they are gone. So you might walk down to the elephants and in the process you walk past 10 or 15 aviaries. You will hear the birds in the background and I guess sometimes they could be annoying, but other times its quite nice but you probably don't hear it unless it is not there, if that makes sense. So it is important to raise the profile of birds for not only the visitors to the zoo but also internally with senior stakeholders in the zoo. So that is the idea and that's what we brought to Taronga.

Each month at the zoo we have a different theme. One month it might be that Sydney Water sponsors the seal show and other companies get involved as well. QBE traditionally sponsor October and QBE sponsored the bird show as well. I think it was a really good tie in with the sponsorship that they already have and they were interested in the birds. So that is how it all started.

The whole idea was a celebration of birds. So like I said, you don't know that they're there until they're gone. Birds have been part of human culture since the beginning of recorded time, in movies and in dancing, in art and even in kids' shows like Sesame Street.

Every day at the zoo we have different talks. There is a chimpanzee talk at 10:00am and there's a seal show at 11:00am and you can pretty much wind your way around different talks that you may want to hear and see. What was fascinating about the bird festival month (which went for the whole of the month and not just for a week) was that we had 11 different bird talks and there were more bird talks or bird activities in the zoo every single day than there was if you added up all the other different talks that usually happen throughout the day.



A lot of the bird talks were guided by volunteers and because Steve and Nick got involved it got support from the senior management and the support came back down. Basically they did a recruitment drive for volunteers. As part of the application process they held mini job interviews so if you wanted to volunteer to be a "bird guided tour" operator you could sit for them. They had special volunteers and then to give them some kind of ownership they did special things for them. One of the things they did was they created a little badge like the image on the flyer, little metal badges that they gave them to make them feel a bit special.

We had two guided bird walks that didn't cover all of the aviaries because we didn't want to make it too long. We picked three specific aviaries around the zoo and the volunteers were approached and trained on what kind of birds were in the aviaries, where they came from, some little quirky facts about those specific birds and the idea was that all of this was to be free of course.



The guided bird walk started at 10:30am just as the zoo opens. The tour started from the main entrance of the zoo where there was a big sign and we got a lot of visitation from that. We did a cassowary talk, obviously there was the free bird flight shows as there always is and we did a bush birds walk of the aviaries. For those of you who have been to the zoo or come to the zoo, they are the horseshoe aviaries up the front. There was a rainforest talk which was another guided bird walk and we had the buy in from the penguins and the pelicans which are looked after by the marine mammal keepers who also did a bird talk for us. The free flight bird show keepers not only do the two bird shows each day but they also look after the Andean Condors so they did a condor talk for us as well. So that is just some of the things that we did.



Another thing that we did was to set up little touch tables around the zoo. They were just little tables with a lot of artefacts on them. You could pick up the eggs, pick up different artefacts, etc., and they attracted a lot of attention. The YATZs kids (a programme called "Youth at the Zoo") that are also volunteers from about the ages of 12 to 19 who pay the zoo money and then they come along and volunteer in their school holidays. It's really awesome and they are fantastic. They get little shirts and other bits and pieces and they actually operated the touch tables. There was also an aboriginal touch table that was in keeping with the bird theme that the aboriginal education staff looked after.



We also had a mini twitch-a-thon. As many of you will know when you go to the zoo you get a map and every now and then they have a map insert. We made a map insert that was specific for the bird festival month and on one side there was a bird twitch-a-thon. One of the aviaries on the twitch-a-thon was the rainforest aviary. This was something that the kids could be involved in. There were some quirky bird facts. Did you know *"that Regent Honeyeaters are critically endangered"* and *"Taronga breeds them for release in the wild"* or did you know *"the emu is the largest bird in Australia and the second biggest in the world"*, etc. The idea was that you'd find the Eclectus Parrot for example and you'd give it a tick.



We also made these hats for the kids. They were just for a bit of fun - there was a honeyeater, a black cockatoo and a galah all in the same nest. It was a little strip that you connect at the back with the nest on the front. They were something like those old Hungry Jacks' hats that they put in with the kids meal for the kids.



Another really, really cool thing, at least I think it was one of the coolest things of the bird festival, was the school kids involvement. I love educating kids. I've got kids of my own and I think it is really fun going into the schools and talking to kids. It is probably the best part of my job.



The zoo's education centre ran a competition and I think they got just under 1,400 entries which is the most they have ever had for this type of thing. It is the role of the zoo's education centre to promote different things within schools, etc. They do things on turtles and the penguins and we have done the Regent honeyeater as well; and things like that.

The education centre put an ad on the teacher's website (which is a little community website that they have) saying do you want to get involved? The entrants had to draw a little picture. There were four categories and they could make up the theme and then they sent them all to the zoo. The winners were drawn and I think they had two winners from each Stage.

The QBE sponsorship paid for turning the winners' entries into banners that flew all around the zoo. There must be about 100 of these banners around the zoo and typically they advertise whatever month it is or if there is not a specific theme for the month it might be just a picture of a gorilla or something else. For example the one in the Wollemi might have platypus, etc.

On top of that the winning student's class came to the zoo free and we put on special things for them. At the free flight bird show they sat down the front in reserved seating especially for them. The free flight bird keepers made special mention of them and they got to participate in the show. Then I picked them up from the show and we went behind the scenes and they got to see a whole heap of things, like the bird kitchen for example. It was all so that they would feel really special, it was an amazing thing. It wasn't just the winning kids that were proud of themselves it was also the classmates of the kids. They were proud of them in return.



Another thing we did was to create a habitat garden. It was just as you come down into the zoo at the entrance of the zoo. This is an aerial shot looking down on it. You would have been able to see this from the cable car. We had some graphics made up and there was a sign near the garden that pointed out the kinds of plants you can plant to provide habitat for birds. That was a real hit with management as well. They were half thinking about leaving it there permanently.



Something else that Nick was passionate about and he organised, was not just to have the bird festival something that was inside the zoo, it was to also make it external to the zoo. Nick approached the local artist's retreat up on the headland and they got involved. The [Headland Park Artists](#) featured an exhibition of

bird themed art works by the 20 artists in the Headland Park Artist's Precinct, Mosman. A range of paintings and sculptures based on local and exotic bird life was exhibited in the Landship Gallery. This presentation was part of the wrap up that we did. Afterwards the lady from the Headland Park Artists came up said that she was quite happy and really excited with the participation she got from quite a lot of the artists.

Another of the fun things that we had outside the zoo was an after hour's movie screening at the [Orpheum in Cremorne](#). They agreed to hire us one of their movie theatres for one night. We had around 100 people come and the movie was "A Birder's Guide to Everything". I just went because I wanted to support the bird festival and I really wasn't thinking I was going to enjoy the movie, but I did. It was a little bit like that show "The Wonder Years". It is story about a 15 year old boy that on the eve of his widower father's second wedding thinks he sees what might be the extinct [Labrador Duck](#). He and a group of his young teenage friends set out on a road trip in search of this rare bird. So if you get a chance to watch it, watch it, it's a pretty cool movie.



Mostly zoo staff attended but not specifically "bird" people. There were people from Human Resources, Public Relations and a lot of our volunteers. As luck would have it we had a tactic training conference in town and they all came along as well. The money that we raised from that went to the Carnaby's Black Cockatoo I believe.

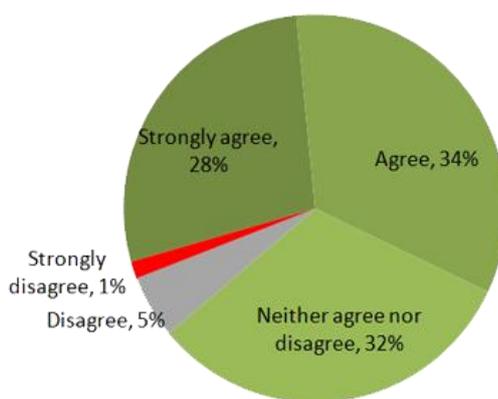
There was also a public lecture at the museum which went well that people also paid money to see and that money was donated somewhere as well.

After completing the bird festival we reviewed what we had achieved. During the bird festival there was surveys conducted and all of the information was collated. These were some of the questions that were asked in a survey as people were leaving. Had they learnt anything about birds in their environment?

This was the whole point of it, to educate people about birds and get them interested in them.

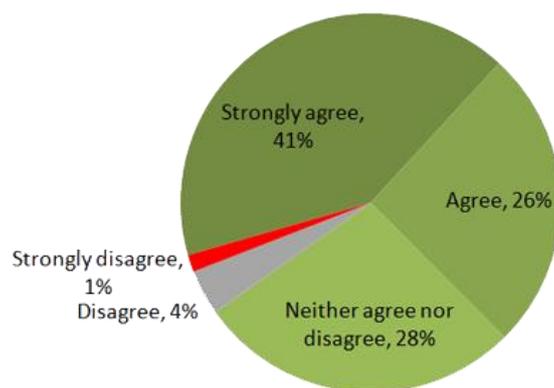
These are pretty good statistics.

I learnt about birds and their environment



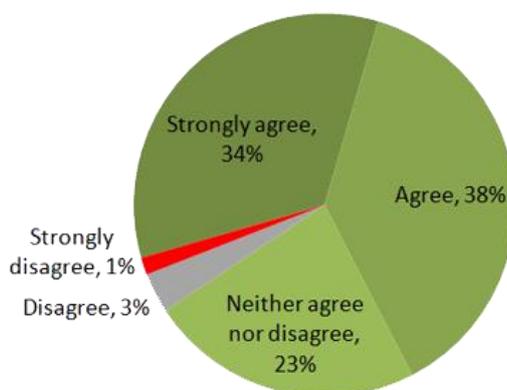
28% strongly agreed and only 5% disagreed that they had learnt about birds in their environment. So 28% + 34% = 62% of people thought that they may have learnt something.

I learnt about the way my behaviour impacts birds and their environment



66% agreed that they learnt something about the way their behaviour affects birds.

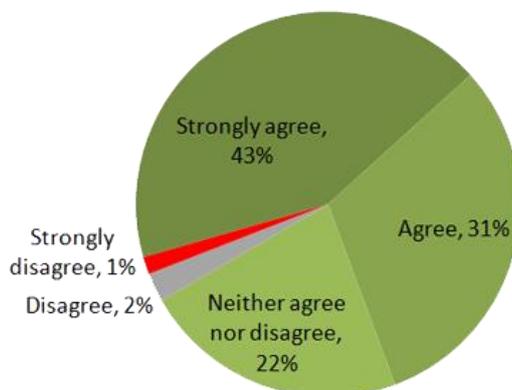
I learnt that Taronga plays a vital role in bird conservation



72% know that Taronga Zoo plays a vital role in bird conservation.

Another one that is a really cool one and is would they do something and it would be amazing to be able to super glue these people once they've agreed that they would make a conscious effort to do things to protect birds and conserve their environment.

I plan to make a conscious effort to do things to help protect birds and conserve their environment



74% of people said that they would do something.
So 72% learnt about something and 71% said that they would actually do it.

That pretty much sums up the Bird Festival!

There were other obvious winners too. The Macaws that we have got at the zoo have been off display for a very long time because we don't really have a South American collection. The birds are displayed to fit a theme and they are not Australian rainforest birds and they're not from the Western Sydney Wollemi area, etc. So it was a time to shake the tablecloth and get the good silverware out. So the birds were on display in all their beauty. I guess what is really nice is there was a lot of positive feedback from above manager's level as well which is really awesome.

Avicultural Society of New South Wales Inc. (ASNSW): <http://www.aviculturalsocietynsw.org>

Contact Us: <http://www.aviculturalsocietynsw.org/contactUs.php>

Join us on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/AviculturalSocietyNSW>

Follow us on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/#!/AvicultureNSW>

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in the Avicultural Review and/or on this website do not necessarily represent those of the Avicultural Society of NSW. No responsibility is accepted by the Society, the Editor, the author/s, Webmaster and/or Administrator/s for the statements, opinions and advice contained herein. Readers should rely upon their own inquiries in making any decisions relating to their own interests.