

Smithsonian

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Around the Mall and beyond

All of our friends over at the National Zoo, be they humans or beasts, took last winter's freezing blasts in stride

The winter of 1994 along our East Coast deserves to live in infamy. Even us oldsters have never seen such a siege of ice storms wrapping our world time after time in rock-hard misery. So my usual springtime visit to old friends at the National Zoo took on special meaning. How well had the tropical simians, the exotics from warm climates and the people who tend them survived winter's prison camp? Mike Morgan, the Zoo's veteran PR man, stashed me in one of the staff's golf carts for a tour. The electric vehicle hadn't been fully charged, so we crept along, overtaken by elderly ladies on foot, to the section devoted to birds.

Wild black-crowned night herons have long used the Zoo as a rookery, showing up every spring. We could see them dotting the as-yet-leafless trees. Mike told me that a half-dozen of them had come flying in a little early on February 1, just in time for one of our worst ice storms. About 20 more arrived a couple of weeks later, during the next winter blast. The bird people were simply amazed to see their fair-weather friends hunker down and brave the ice and snow.

On this pleasant day, the herons seemed comfortable enough, and their nests were unobscured—rough clumps of sticks where the young are raised, obviously in Spartan discomfort. Technicians were setting up a pair of spring-loaded rods that would bring a mist net down over a few herons attracted by some buckets of fish. Eventually they'll be donating a little blood to science, said Suzanne Ambs, who is studying herons for her

master's degree at George Mason University. "Blood typing is just another way of checking up on them." Night herons, sometimes called "quawks" because of the call they most often make, occur worldwide, and their rookeries survive in some strangely inhospitable places. The Zoo is anything but inhospitable, but I've seen them on the Patapsco River, near the smoggy industries of Baltimore, at another rookery where they dutifully flock as springtime's harbingers.

We set out to see how the Zoo's ducks were doing. Just fine, it turned out. "They have a new type of food—pellets that sink," said Mike. He showed me one of the submerged tin trays into which the pellets are dropped. "Starlings and pigeons can't steal it, and the diving ducks feel at home with it." I paused to admire some wood ducks that, along with ubiquitous mallards, act as if they own the place. As always, the sight of a male wood duck knocked me out—that incredible combination of iridescent colors, all fresh and bright in springtime. Its scientific name is *Aix sponsa*, which means, "waterfowl in wedding clothes."

Mike hurried me (at three miles an hour) to the Panda House in order to beat the busloads of kids, just arriving. Brenda Morgan (who, incidentally, is Mike's wife) introduced me to the "old gentleman," Hsing-Hsing (Mike says it's properly pronounced SHING-SHING). He's a widower now and quite ancient for a panda—about 23 years. No one

knows how long pandas live in the wild, but the Morgans say that Hsing-Hsing, like other zoo pandas, wasn't expected to live much beyond 13 when he arrived back in 1972. Earlier this year Hsing-Hsing came down with a severe eye infection and started to lose his vision. But Zoo veterinarian Lisa Tell and animal eye specialist Dr. Seth A. Koch intervened with antibiotics and minor surgery. Today Hsing-Hsing seems strong, and his vision is much improved. He even eyed me amiably, gently took my proffered carrots in his teeth, then held them in one paw while chomping them down, one by one.

"Did you ever hear of a New Guinea singing dog?" asked Mike. I had not and wondered if he was putting me on. But near the Panda House we found Rebecca Smithson (a name we spell correctly around here) looking after Daru and Enga, two beagle-size, reddish wild dogs, both wagging a tail in greeting. Enga, the female, was very shy and kept her distance, though she watched us with interest. But her mate, Daru, ventured up to my closed hand, daintily sniffed it, then gave it a tentative lick. "They sing in the evening and early morning," said Rebecca. "A yodeling howl, quite distinctive." The origin of the dogs is uncertain, but they look exactly like pure Australian dingos—the same coloring, bushy tail, fox ears and wide face, heavy with jaw muscles. Yet they're about a third of the size. In the lush New Guinea



Cheetah is lured out of winter inertia for a run on the new exercise course. Fabric swatch (bottom right) whips around pulley system as big cat gives chase.