

F Conway article

This communication was found under the wing of a Canada Goose that had been killed by vandals at the Bronx Zoo. It was reluctantly read by that zoo's director at the Mid-Winter Conference of the American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums, March 2, 1964.

December 24, 1963

The International Animal League  
The Board of Trustees

From: Branta canadensis

481st Hereditary President, 11th Dynasty

Gentleganders:

In these days of international strife when all that we hold dear, when all that we have flown and called for, seems jeopardized; when the basic tenets of our future such as the "Closed Season" and the "Migratory Bird Act" are flouted; the letter of your retiring President, who finds himself in an out-of-season molt, must dwell on serious matters.

Our colleagues and friends have long identified their futures with that rapidly-breeding creature called man. As a gander I note that some of my own ancestors have willingly sold themselves and their children into a situation of slavery hardly paralleled in the free world. A grandmother of mine in the first dynasty 422,000 years ago dwelt near a family of proto-hominids in East Africa. She watched her neighbors descend from a tree - and club her goslings to death. My 251st grandfather in the 9th dynasty watched his paleolithic neighbors fiddle with sticks and create fire - only to see his wife roasted! Today you watch while these same creatures experiment with the atom - silly geese indeed. And today, gentleganders, we are once again in error. In espousing the development of zoological parks we have misplaced our trust and misjudged the future.

Fellow geese, until now I have not taxed our League with my personal history. I ask your patience with an old bird whose memories may help guide you, though his primaries are frayed and his syrinx hoarse.

My wife known to many of you, met her death as the result of an insecurely tied tourniquet in a pinioning operation at a growing mid-continent zoo. Her murderer, a Zoo Director and former Veterinarian whose name, ironically enough, is "Goose," still runs free. As you know, I was hatched in a small marsh in Maine. My father was an unparalleled migrator and carried Fish and Wildlife Band No. 111. He disappeared over the Chesapeake when he was only 39. Glenn Miller was lost on the other side of the globe on the same day - thus father's disappearance went unremarked. Mother was a goose of very tight feather. She had once posed for Louis Fuertes and she worked six months for Ding Darling. One night during the Spring migration of '46 she took refuge in an abandoned coal mine during a severe storm. The next day, badly soiled, she was shot out of season in a bus station in Birmingham.

With both of my parents gone, I felt half in molt and not eager for permanent pair-formation. What, then to do with my life? My father and his father before him had pointed to the development of zoos as the most encouraging single factor in better Man-world and Wild-world understanding. Many of our relatives from the International Animal League have espoused the zoo movement and have thrown themselves wholeheartedly into the field of exhibition and display. Perhaps in an excess of despair at the loss of my parents, I resolved to dedicate my life to zoo exhibition; to act as a representative of my kind in the promotion of interspecies understanding and appreciation.

Starting with sincerity and exhibiting myself zealously, I was soon disillusioned. I began by calling upon an Animal Dealer with an unpronounceable name in the hope of receiving guidance and counsel, but before I was even able to state my business and identify myself as a Canada Gander, I became the subject of a series of telegrams and found myself sold to a zoo in Boston as a Paradise Shelduck! Resolved not to lose heart, I sought a position in the new Boston Children's Zoo, but soon found the crowds of children intolerable. Only later did I learn that I had mistakenly stumbled into the home of the Zoo Director.

By the time I made my escape, it was Fall. Flying by night to avoid hunters, I made my way to the huge Bronx Zoo in New York. At first I was impressed. I was promptly weighed, banded and identified as to subspecies - but then I was placed in a small cage by myself and completely forgotten. Eventually, I gained entrance to a spacious exhibit where I recognized many friends and acquaintances. Conversation among my fellow exhibits was on a very high plane - but the constant calls by those among us who were being hit by stones, bottles and paper clips led me to the conclusion that New York might be a nice place to visit but I wouldn't want to nest there! How could our cause be advanced in zoos that do not protect us from vandalism?

Early in January, my disenchantment became complete. I was quietly examining a large abandoned Black Swan egg when I was suddenly grasped from behind by a tall, thin man who, later that evening, awarded me a Gold Medal at the Waldorf-Astoria. I escaped the next day and wrote a number of letters of inquiry to the Director of a large zoo in Chicago but he never answered. Later I wrote a Zoo Director in Texas and received a prompt answer - but I couldn't understand it. Finally, I decided to fly west.

At the St. Louis Zoo I readily obtained a job on a television show and at one time or another acted the parts of a mouse, an elephant, a Bushman and a Board member. As a Board member I was considered too goosey and soon resigned. My trip west was long and eventful but, in time, I arrived at the great San Diego Zoo.

In San Diego I felt I had at last found a place where my services would be appreciated. I was frightened at first by the Director, who had a way of widely revealing his incisors when he wanted to be friendly, but the weather was wonderful and my fellow exhibits exuded confidence. But then this idyll was shattered. I found myself thrown into an enclosure with three females of my own species, to whom I had never even been introduced. I was told to breed - or else.

We were shocked. We geese, unlike man, have always mated for life; moreover, we have a strong feeling of territory and traditional pre-pairing ceremony. How, I worried, could our cause be advanced in such a climate of mutual misunderstanding? Gladys, as one goose was called - a sensitive bit of feather - spent her time running up and down the fence attempting to return to her betrothed in an adjoining exhibit. After artificial insemination she hung herself in the wire. My wings had been clipped and I could not leave until after a molt, but I gained new insight into the zoo world when I found myself counted three times in one census. I voiced my suspicions to the management and was told that San Diego College would be asked to conduct a survey.

Eventually, I left the Southwest and travelled from zoo to zoo, searching for an institution seriously involved in the great task of promoting interspecies understanding. I dropped into the Portland Zoo in the hope of clearing up my chronic aspergillosis and was nearly stepped on by a juvenile elephant. In Milwaukee I regained some of my faltering confidence in that zoo's cheerful and colorful atmosphere of blue prints and green backs.

In each zoo I voluntarily carried on my program of personal exhibition and I left all but one zoo with an unblemished record. The one exception occurred when I found myself being exhibited in a brightly-colored, glass-fronted, tile-walled display. It had wonderful stainless steel fixtures of many interesting shapes. Ever adaptable to circumstances, I tried to spend my days on public view doing just what I imagine a man does in a tile bathroom -- and I was thrown out! Moreover, I was admonished that I should behave normally and look like a wild animal. I tried very hard, when I was given a second chance, but the Curator was dissatisfied and fired me. He maintained that I "only managed to look like a wild goose in a tile bathroom."

Fellow wild creatures, consider well these experiences. Do not let distant wingbeats or early pair-formation induce fatal forgetfulness. Our future does not lie with man and zoos. A zoo could be an important outpost of the Wild-world in Man-world. It could promote interspecies understanding and appreciation - but it does not. How can we hope to represent our species in a forum which often fails even to identify us, which, at most, devotes 5 lines of text to our cause on signs so unimaginative that visitors from the Man-world rarely pause to read them? Zoos do not deserve our wild animal representatives! I say, down with representation without education!

Our species are diminishing. The time is not far off when we may join the Heath Hen, the Quagga, the Laborador Duck and the Animal Dealer. But look not to the zoo for salvation through captive breeding. How many of our captive breeding populations have died out through zoo indifference already? And remember, you of my own family, there are no geese at the Catskill Game Farm. I say to you, down with representation without propagation!

Perhaps I have already gabbled too long and have become a garrulous old gander, but I ask you to consider carefully the fitness of our continued service to those zoos which concentrate on maintaining unseemly numbers of species. It is true that among our own colleagues we have had great trouble with those acquisitive crows and magpies.



They are not bad birds but they have lost sight of the purpose of collecting. Nest building and creative production is not good enough for them. They want to say they have more gewgaws than anybody else and their hobby is conducted at public expense. When our species representatives are crowded in zoos, we know that our death rate rises and that our reproductive success usually falls. We know that our individual species delegations command far less attention. Now I know that you have all heard the plea of domestic geese, that we should take pity upon the Zoo Man who keeps too many species - that he is merely trying to recreate in his zoo that most civilized of man's urban inventions, the slum tenement. But, colleagues, I say over-representation should lead to zoo-man extermination!

Naturally, one would think that no zoo man would agree with the counsel that I have offered you. But perhaps, after all, I have underestimated the conscience of the modern zoo man. Only yesterday I received a letter from the Director of a European zoo who wrote me concerning a large flock of wild geese that were paying unwanted visits to one of his waterfowl ponds and damaging his gardens. His letter ended "... and I eagerly await your help, for I have the largest collection of animals in the world, so what I need is complete extermination."

Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen.