

# Tropical Anim

WRITTEN BY GLORIA HILDEBRANDT



**F**or a tropical experience on the Escarpment, Bird Kingdom in Niagara Falls provides welcome heat, humidity and the enjoyment of being in a bird-filled jungle.



# als in Winter

PHOTOGRAPHED BY MIKE DAVIS  
[EXCEPT WHERE NOTED]



Waterfall window. Water cascades in front of this view into Bird Kingdom's three-storey aviary.





The path through the large aviary begins at the top. Lush foliage is home to around 200 exotic birds. This indoor jungle is tended by horticulturalist Lori Beneteau. The full-time job includes watering, removing debris, growing cuttings and planting new plants.

**T**he dramatic highlight of a visit to Bird Kingdom has to be the spectacular three-storey aviary where exotic birds of all kinds and sizes fly freely and are welcome to do whatever they want. The building is 46,000 sq ft and 65 ft tall, or in metres, 4,275 sq m and 20 m tall. The path through this aviary starts at the top and winds through the trees down to the bottom. The way is completely accessible for wheelchairs and strollers.

There are around 200 birds living here, representing more than 40 species from around the world. Birds flit, fly, hop, squawk and call through the lush plants that fill the glass building. At first it may be difficult to see the birds, but many have colourful plumage that let them stand out against the greenery.

Spectacular examples of vibrant species are the Blue and Gold Macaw, Scarlet Ibis, Blue-Crowned Pigeon.

► These are Beau Bébé, a Blue-fronted Amazon parrot and Max, a Hyacinth Macaw. They are a cross-species pair and appear to be very fond of each other.







▲ The bright blue in a feather from a Blue and Gold Macaw fades to a light grey when held to light. This phenomenon is called structural colour, meaning the colour is produced by microscopically structured surfaces that interfere with light. This colour appears to our eyes due to reflection rather than pigmentation. PHOTO BY GLORIA HILDEBRANDT.



The majestic Blue and Gold Macaw enjoys its swing.



► The Scarlet Ibis is a wading bird from South America.







◀ The Blue-crowned Pigeon originates in New Guinea.



▶ Named Thor, the male Great Argus Pheasant rests in the foreground while the female is further back. This species is from Asia.

Not as colourful, but equally exciting, are the large Golden Pheasant, the Great Argus Pheasant, the Laughing Kookaburra from Australia.

### Cross-Species Pairs

A fascinating development is that some of these birds have formed cross-species friendships, or pair bonds. One sweet couple is a Blue-

fronted Amazon parrot called Beau Bébé and Max, a much larger Hyacinth Macaw. Another pair is a Silvery-cheeked Hornbill and a Pied Crow. These two species have very different nesting habits, which led to some confusion between them. Steve Bush, education ambassador with Bird Kingdom, says “Polo brought

up a stick to her in the nest box and she opened her giant beak and feinted at him.” The female didn’t appreciate what the male was offering.

### Feed the Birds!

There is one place in the large aviary where visitors are able to feed the birds. Lorikeet Landing is a large caged area that is home to

three kinds of Lorikeets from Australia, who have big beaks and are very colourful, and who look like small parrots. In the cage, the Lorikeets fly freely around people.

A visitor is given a small plastic cup of white liquid to hold out, and if a Lorikeet wants to, it will land on the outstretched hand or arm to feed from the cup. Two





▲ A bird from China, this female Golden Pheasant has stately tail feathers.

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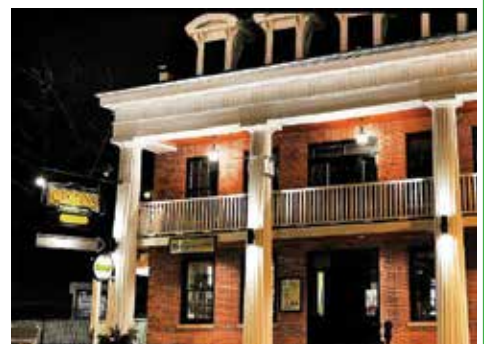
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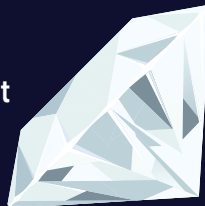
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▲ The Silver Pheasant is a stunning bird originating in Asia.

birds might compete for the liquid, and one may even give a warning nibble to a human finger as if to say “Behave!” And beware: a visitor standing too close to the cage wall could receive an unwelcome gift from a bird above, and experience hot guano down the neck and back!

Steve explains that Lorikeets “need to be in a separate area because they eat different food than the other birds in the aviary, and hard foods like seeds can damage the tongue bristles they need to drink nectar.”

### Other Experiences

While the three-storey aviary is the most dramatic area of Bird Kingdom, there are other exhibits to experience. The first is an open aviary where staff handlers demonstrate interactions with a variety of species of parrots. These birds seem to love attention and performing small tricks for treats. It’s possible to get very close to these birds.

Another space, the Small Aviary, is a large room for free-flying smaller species including finches, pigeons, doves and quail, which enjoy foraging on the



▲ Australia’s Laughing Kookaburra, with its amazing call, is always a favourite.





▲ Mike Davis with Lorikeets feeding from his hands. PHOTO BY GLORIA HILDEBRANDT.

ground. There are 20 species of birds here, some rare or endangered. Tortoises and tiny frogs share the habitat.

A nocturnal area houses

creatures like bats, owls, frogs, snakes and lesser-known species, that may be active at night. These have shelters behind glass in darkened areas.

### Conservation

Conservation issues are important here. The Egyptian Fruit Bats living in the nocturnal area are part of a species survival plan, which is, according to Steve, “accredited zoos working together to keep a species healthy in human care. There is a coordinator who makes sure the population is kept genetically diverse and at a good population level. Then if the species ever starts to decline in its native range, accredited zoos can reintroduce it and give the species a second chance to avoid extinction.”

None of the birds and animals here were caught in the wild to become exhibits for Bird Kingdom. Some were donated by people who tried them as pets but can no longer look after them. Some animals were bought from breeders in Canada. Other animals were transferred

from other accredited zoos while four birds came from local wildlife rehabilitators.

“Exotic animals are not good pets,” notes Steve. “Most parrot species are in decline due to capture for the pet trade, plus other types of animals. The more we can reduce demand for exotic pets, the better off the species will be in their native range.”

It’s recommended that you allow 60 to 90 minutes to walk through Bird Kingdom, but it’s easy to spend a lot longer than that. Groups of 10 or more can arrange to have a tour with an animal care staff member who can answer questions and help you see the animals you would like to see. One family with three young boys frequently comes from Scarborough in the east end of Toronto to spend an afternoon there.

As Steve says, “There’s always something different to see each time you come.” **NEV**



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