QUEER—BUT TRUE!

Some Interesting and Amusing Animal Stories, related by Leslie G. Mainland.*

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Now here are a lot of extraordinary things about the animals at the Zoological Gardens, and you *must* believe them because they are perfectly true.

There is never any need to "make-up" stories about the birds, beasts, reptiles, and fishes there, because nothing could be so funny, so wonderful, and so curious as the things that actually happen.

They are always surprising the people who have lived among them all their lives. Take the ordinary toad. You would think there are no surprises left about *him*—the ugly, common-place creature.

Well, there was just one thing we humans wanted to know about him, and that was how he uses his tongue when feeding. It is much too quick for the eye to follow. He bends over a grub or a meal worm, something flashes, and the grub simply *isn't!*

The Ostrich *can* be ridden—if you know how to do it!

"We will soon solve this little mystery," said the clever men. "We have a cinema camera here which will take 250 pictures in a single second. These photographs will show us how the toad uses his tongue, and then there will be one more secret solved."

So they gave a hungry toad at the Zoo a little heap of grubs to eat, and took a film of him as he had his lunch.

When they developed that film, they found the toad had beaten them after all. They were only just able to see the toad's tongue in three of the 250 pictures, which meant that—threes into 250—he took less than a *sixtieth of a second* over his grub, and how he used his tongue to lick up his prey was as big a mystery as ever.

There was the case of the Zoo otter, too, which surprised a very learned zoologist in a most annoying way.

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A little girl threw a bun inside the otter's cage when the great man came by.

"Little girl," he said, stroking his beard, "you clearly know nothing about otters, or you would not give it a bun. Otters are water-loving creatures and live on fish. It is a waste of good food to throw buns to them. He would not like the taste, and his dentition—" he meant the otter's teeth—"is not fitted ——" But at that moment he turned his head and saw that the wretched otter was actually eating the beastly bun!

So he had to cut short his lecture on the habits of the otter and walk off. And it was all so muddling for that small child, too!

The Cat Bear.

There is a curious thing, too, about the cellars under the Reptile House, where they heat the hot-water pipes that keep the snakes warm and snug through the winter.

Years and years ago when the first American rattle-snakes were unpacked at the Reptile House, *something* escaped from the box and scuttled away into the cellars. Ever since then the *somethings* have multiplied there, and there are lots there to-day. If you were blindfolded and they put a bowl of these *somethings* under your nose and told you to sniff very hard, you would say at once, "Why, I am smelling a bowl of lovely roses!" Then the keepers would laugh and take the bandage off your eyes, and tell you to look; and you would be disgusted, for the beautiful scent comes from some huge black beetles, much larger ones than we are used to in this country. The things are called "Blatta Americana," and students—grown-up schoolboys—often ask for some to study.

The Toad, who is a lightning feeder.

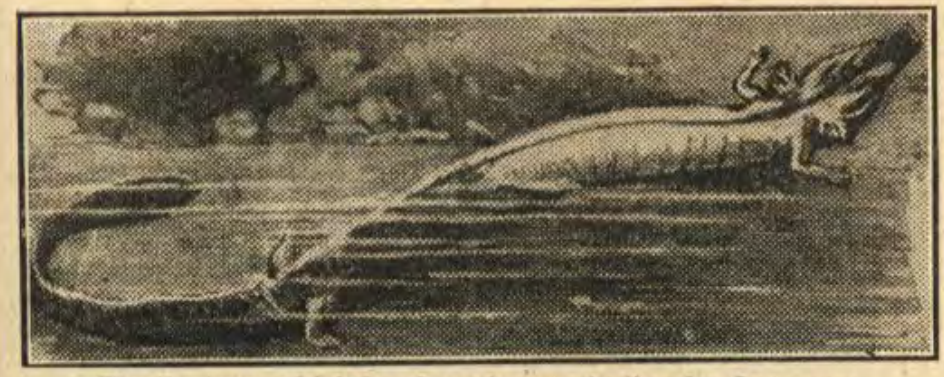
Feeding is the cause of some of the greatest surprises at the Zoo; especially the kinds of food a creature takes. Some astonish you—reptiles especially—by doing without meals for years. There is a 20-foot python which has lived for *two and a half years* without a single meal. It is still too early to get anxious about him, for one lived in the Paris Zoo for *over three years* without a single bite of anything. A tiny blind newt, called the "Proteus," has been known to live for *five years* without food. It is found in an underground cave in Austria, known as the Grotto of the Maddalena. Hundreds of feet of solid rock lie between the grotto and the sun, and there you will find a pool with a bed of mud. The Proteus is not always found there, but sometimes, from even deeper caves, an underground flood comes which swells up to the Maddalena pool. When the flood sinks down into the depths of the rock, a shoal of these pinky-grey newts is left behind, thrown up from some mysterious cavern no one has ever seen. Let a single ray of sunshine fall on one of these queer creatures and, in spite of its blindness, it squirms as if in terrible pain.

When the Zoo has a Proteus in the Reptile House, water-creatures from the Alligator's Pool are put in its tank, so that it *can* feed if it wants to.

Compare the five-year fast of the Proteus with the case of the tiny humming bird, which starves to death if it goes for more than a single night without food. When a French collector was catching humming birds last year, he found that every one he trapped after midday died in the night. This is why.

The little things—about the size of a bumble-

bee—had to be taught to feed in a new way, instead of sipping honey out of a flower. A mixture of condensed milk and honey was placed in a tin with a hole in it. He dipped their beaks into the hole every ten minutes until they learned that the tin was just as useful as a flower at meal-times, and then they fed themselves about once a minute. But all birds stop feeding when the sun sets—even chickens in the poultry run. Humming birds caught in the afternoon could not learn the trick of feeding from the tin in the few hours of daylight which was left to them, and so they died. Those caught in the morning *just* had time to learn the trick and save their lives.



The Proteus, which has been known to live for five years without food.

Sometimes a queer new creature comes to the Zoo, and no one knows what its proper food is. When the "Panda," or Cat Bear, first came from the mountains of Thibet, the keepers had to experiment to find out what it ought to eat.

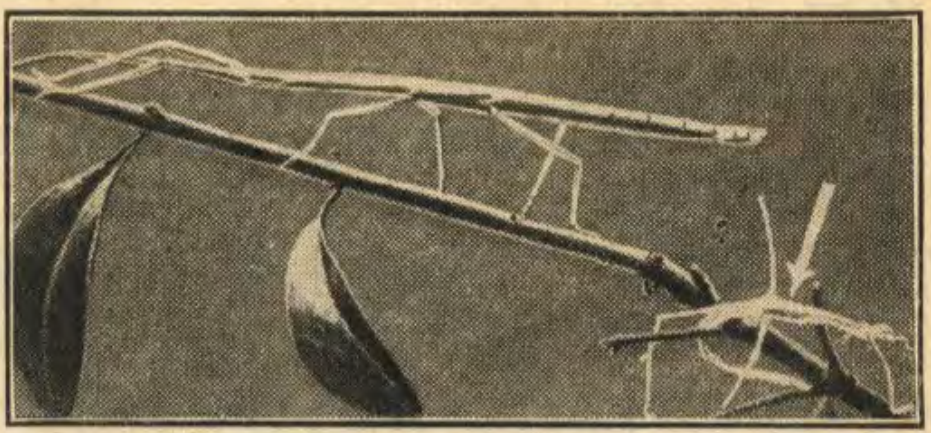
"The Cat Bear will know what suits its own tummy," they thought. "We will give it a little bit of everything, see what it eats, and learn the secret of its food." So they got a lot of tins and filled them with: Dates from Egypt, potatoes from Ireland, nuts from Brazil, grapes from Italy, lettuces from France, sparrows from London, apples from California, mutton from New Zealand, bananas from Jamaica, bread and milk from England. Then they watched the Cat Bear choose its "natural food."

The aggravating little beast chose the British bread-and-milk, and lived on *that!* Now, it does not seem likely that the creature *can* get bread-and-milk in the forest round the mountains of Thibet, so another natural history puzzle was unsolved.

Now and then the keepers at the Zoo hear something which surprises them about creatures they have known all their lives. Take the ordinary ostrich, which is not a rare bird at all, and which has been kept in this country ever since there was a Zoo.

A year or two ago a great expert, who looks after the ostrich farms of the South African Government, paid a visit to the Zoo in London. When he got to the Ostrich House he saw there was a drinking-place for them. "What!" he said. "Do you give your ostriches anything to drink? Didn't you know that ostriches *never* need anything at all to drink?"

He explained that on the great ostrich farms these birds were never given water or any other liquid, because the green food they ate contained all the moisture they needed. So, nearly two years ago, the Zoo's ostriches were given no more water, and they have not had a drink since!



The queer Stick-Insect, which casts off its skin. The insect is shewn here feeding on a privet-twig, having just cast its old skin (arrow).

You can say that the ostrich is the bird that eats anything and drinks nothing. An ostrich will swallow any mortal thing which takes its fancy—from a bunch of keys to a penknife. If nothing more interesting is offered, ostriches pick up pieces of stone to swallow. Of course, there is a reason. They are not swallowed because they taste nice, nor does the ostrich expect to satisfy its hunger on such queer diet. There is a kind of grinding mill inside the ostrich, made of very strong muscles. Pieces of stone which are gulped down go into this mill, to act as grindstones and powder the hard corn—which is part of the *real* food of the bird—into flour which is more easily digested. So, you see, that instead of this queer taste for stones giving the bird indigestion it actually *prevents* that malady.

You can give the birds shillings or sixpences, but pennies are bad for them, because copper is poisonous. The keepers get the silver coins after the bird has died, but they are all worn thin by the action of the grinding mill.

When ostrich eggs are laid at the Zoo they are often "blown" and divided among the keepers' wives. They are just as good for cooking, "scrambling," or omelettes as hen's eggs. The "blowing" is done into a bowl with the help of a bicycle-pump, to which is fixed a special brass nozzle. One ostrich egg will make an omelette large enough for thirty people.

Another creature which will take anything, of course, is the monkey. But the monkey does not eat anything until it has carefully sniffed and smelled it to see if it is safe. If it is not good to eat, then the monkey will play with it until it gets bored. There was a Chacma baboon, called "Daisy," in the Monkey House who once wrenched half-a-sovereign from a visitor's watch-chain. She had jaws like a steel trap, so no one liked to go inside the cage and argue with her. She played with it and then hid it in one of her cheek-pouches, as if it were a nut, and the poor owner went away in a great rage. She took it out and played with it day after day, and the man it belonged to used to pay to go to the Zoo in the hope of being able to snatch it back. "Perhaps she will get tired of it," he thought, "and leave it on the floor of the cage where I can rake it out."

A fine European wolf-cub, which was presented to the Zoo by King Boris of Bulgaria.

Daisy used to go to the "purse" in her cheek when she saw him, and gloat over her ill-gotten gains, as if she knew she was tormenting a human. The poor chap must have spent 7s. or 8s. to watch the wretched baboon playing with his property. At last he decided it was not worth throwing good money after bad!

"Jack"—another baboon—stole a medal from a soldier. Having been a regimental pet during the war, I suppose Jack felt he ought to have a medal himself. Another of Jack's crimes was to clutch a man's watch chain, drag him to the bars and then make a clever cunning snatch at his valuable tie-pin.

Of course, scarcely a week passes without the monkeys' stealing the eye-glasses off someone's nose. One monkey was sent to the Zoo for that very crime.

He was a pet on board ship until he snatched a pair of gold-rimmed eye-glasses off the nose of a passenger and then climbed the mast with them. Every minute the owner expected to hear them come clattering down to smash on the deck, but this monkey hung on to them somehow, biting and sniffing at them until he got tired of them—like a child with a toy. Then the monkey fixed them on the ship's wireless gear and came down without them.

Now and then you hear of an animal breaking out of its cage at the Zoo. Barbara, the big Polar Bear, got away once and caused no end of excitement. She went to the refreshment rooms, and was very peevish because they were not opened. She wandered round, scaring the keepers until some one hit on a happy idea. She was very fond of fat—all creatures are that live in cold climates—so they laid a regular "Hop o' my Thumb" trail of fat along the paths. Barbara came to the first piece and ate it. Then she went on to the next and the next and the next. She was so busy eating that she did not notice where the trail was leading her, and when she got to the last lovely bit she heard a clanging noise and looked round. She had eaten her way back into her own cage again, and they had just slammed the door on her.

One of the most desperate prison-breakers they ever had at the Zoo was a "Goffin's Cockatoo." This bird had a tremendous beak. He could crack Brazil-nuts as if they were so many peas. He soon found that he could use his beak as a pair of wire-cutters and escaped from his cage. They trapped him three times and repaired the wires, but the old scoundrel only bit his way out again and lived in the trees as free as air.

"We'll let him alone, then," said the keepers. "Good riddance to the pest." But the cockatoo could not let things stay at that, for he flew back to the out-door cages, and bit away at the wire *so as to let the other cockatoos escape*, and the keepers' lives became a burden to them for they had to be "shooing" him away all the time.

Sometimes there are guests who sleep in the Zoo and work anywhere they like. There are the bees, who have a glass hive in the Insect House with a hole in the back of their cage so that they can go out and gather honey from the flowers in the Zoological Gardens.

If you are lucky, you may see a very queer creature in the Insect House—the Giant Stick Insect. This is the biggest of all creepy things, the females being nearly a foot long. They have a wonderful dodge for their eggs. If they were laid in a branch some animal might eat them, for they are quite large eggs—looking something like a small black pea. The mother's idea is to distribute her eggs over a large area so that they cannot *all* be unlucky. Nature has given her a wonderful kind of spring pistol in her tail. With this egg-gun she can shoot much farther than across an ordinary room. She shoots about 250 eggs, and if you are on the spot, you can hear them "ping" like little stones as they hit the glass of her cage.

One of them was taken out once to be photographed. Just as the photographer was getting ready to take her picture *she shot him in the waistcoat!*

Photographers have a very hard life at the Zoo sometimes, especially when the animals are very tame and curious. The King of Bulgaria helped a British officer to secure a very rare young wolf, which was presented to the Zoo. Then they wanted to photograph the wolf so as to send a copy to the king. For days the photographer tried to get that picture. The wolf—which was as friendly as a collie dog—came up and breathed on his lens. Then it licked the blacking off the man's boots, or tried to kill his socks or wanted to kiss him, or tried to knock his hat off, or pulled his coat sleeve. It would do anything but stay still. Three dozen plates were wasted. They showed blurs instead of a wolf, or a wolf with three heads and eleven legs, or just plain den without any wolf at all.

It was just as disappointing as the toad who would not take longer than the sixtieth part of a second over his meal.

However, a photo was obtained at last—there it is on the opposite page!

THE END.