



## The Zoological Garden Newsletter



### “Enlistment day” for the eastern spadefoot toad breeding core

In our Zoological Garden we have a breeding core of over 500 **eastern spadefoot toads**, all of which are about to enter an aestivation period (summer dormancy). During this period they hardly eat or leave their hiding places. Thus, at this time it is hard to monitor their physical condition or to tend to the soil in the containers in which they are living, as any activity carried out in their containers greatly disturbs them. Consequently, Yael Ballon, who is studying this species for her MSc degree, under the supervision of Prof. Noga Kronfeld-Schor, and Hamutal Ben Ishay, who works as an animal keeper in the Zoological Garden, organised a “volunteers’ day”. To our delight many volunteers took up the call, above and beyond our expectations! During this “enlistment day” all the toads were removed from their containers, weighed, new soil was added to the containers, the water containers were refreshed – and now all is ready for the summer. The atmosphere of the day was exhilarating,





volunteers came and went, helped themselves to refreshments and at the end of the day enjoyed a cool beer and biscuits. Yael and Hamutal have asked us to take this opportunity to extend their very grateful thanks to all the volunteers who arrived and worked so hard, contributing to the great atmosphere; and they invite everyone to visit the breeding core in their free time. The photos showing the volunteers at work were taken by Prof. Noga Kronfeld-Schor.

### **Release of newts back to nature**

On June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015 a second release took place this season of **newts**, which have been breeding for the second year running in the amphibian breeding colony of our Zoological Garden. Around 400 newt tadpoles and fully metamorphosed individuals were released this time, at three suitable sites, carefully chosen and near to the site of their original pond at the “Checkpost” area, near Haifa. At these sites and near to them, we had released 1,500 tadpoles two months ago, and last year around 550 individuals after metamorphosis.

In recent weeks we have monitored the area, and to our great delight we found three young individuals: two of them had only just completed metamorphosis while one looked older, about one year old. We believe that these individuals are the newts that we had released at the site and adjacent to it around two months ago as well as last year. We consider this to be so because no other newt population is known to exist in the area.

The photos, taken by Yael Ballon, show a newt discovered in the area.



## News from the reptile yard

A large and impressive specimen of a *boa constrictor*, a long-term resident of our Zoological Garden but which was kept out of sight to visitors had been housed in the reptile yard. Today, thanks to the initiative of Prof. David Eilam and the devoted work of the animal keepers, Barak Levy and Ovad Hillel, in renovating an old cage for display, our boa is housed in a large and spacious cage, lined with leaves and equipped with a water tub, and can now be seen at the end of the first row of snake cages.

Despite the *boa constrictor* not being a representative of the fauna of Israel, it contributes to the instruction of students and groups of pupils on various subjects relating to reptiles and locomotion.

There have also been changes to the rodent cages in the northern section of the reptile yard, thanks to the hard work of Barak Levy. In the first cage, closest to the entrance, we now have six **Sundevall's jirds** (*Meriones crassus*); in the next cage are a group of ten **field voles** (*Microtus*); and in the fifth cage there are two **bushy-tailed jirds**.





In the vole cage you can see a small version of their habitat. The cage features several chambers, which the voles use to store food or in which to hide. In nature there are tunnels connecting between the chambers, but the cage only has a thin layer of soil, so we can see the tunnels as ditches connecting between chambers or stretching along the walls of the enclosure. The voles move at very high speed along these



tunnels, usually after first peeping out from a chamber. They generally all crowd together in one chamber while storing their food in another one. The vole display is part of the large colony of voles, which serves a variety of studies carried out in the laboratory of Prof. David Eilam: Sivan Bodek's PhD research focuses on the social hierarchy and leadership roles in times of danger; the PhD research of Omri Weiss focuses on the spatial organisation of behaviour in groups of animals; and Chen Rabi's MSc research focuses on the response of voles to attack by barn owls.

### Romantic dramas on the grass

Fifteen years ago in the Zoological Garden, living a peaceful and tranquil life, were four swans: two **white swans** (males) and a pair of **black swans** (male and female), which produced infertile eggs. About a year ago one of the black swans died, and for a period of time the black female wandered alone and lonely, before eventually joining the two white swans. Throughout the entire past year the three swans lived a peaceful social life.

However, about a month ago one of the white swans began to wander around alone in the internal parking lot, near the keepers' dining room. Each time the keepers returned him to





the grass area, but he kept coming back, without any perceptible reason. He even began to swim in a small water tub in the area, and it seemed that he was beginning to look upon the parking lot as his permanent home. The mystery was solved after a few days: it seems that the other white (male) swan and the black female had begun to establish a bond, and our hero was no longer a part of the former threesome. All that we can now do is to follow and see how it all develops.

## Newsflash from the Zoological Garden

✚ We have finally solved the mystery of the alien egg in the grey goose nest, whose photo featured in the April newsletter. After it hatched, it was clear that this was an **Egyptian goose** egg and not a peahen egg, as we had previously thought. According to Prof. Yoram Yom-Tov, in conversation with Dr Ron Elazari, it seems that among ground-nesting birds, whose chicks are precocial, no mechanism has developed for preventing parasitism, such as the ability to identify an alien egg, due to the relatively low energetic cost of raising such chicks in comparison with raising altricial chicks.



✚ The two groups of **eagle-owls**, which are located side by side in the northern part of the Zoological Garden, were once considered as two populations or sub-species of the species *Bubo bubo*. However, about five years ago they were reclassified as different species – the northern population is called the Eurasian eagle-owl (*Bubo bubo*) and the desert population is the Pharaoh eagle-owl (*Bubo ascalaphus*). Some of these eagle-owls have been with us for the last 40 years (!), having originated in our old Zoological Garden in Abu Kabir.



✚ The **seagull chicks** that wander around the lawn have grown a great deal. It is nice to follow them and observe how they are still being closely accompanied by their parents.

✚ Our male **houbara bustard** continues to dance... some of the hibiscus shrubs that hid his cage from the path have been cut back, to make observing him easier.