

SMITHSONIAN **Zoogoer**

For members of **FRIENDS OF THE NATIONAL ZOO**
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wild

**Wildlife and science
at the Zoo's
Front Royal
research station**

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BEAST BITS

Cool Costume

About a foot long, common leaf-tailed geckos could make tasty snacks for predators in their Madagascar habitat. But first, a predator would need to find a gecko. That's not easy, thanks to the gecko's camouflage. The reptile's tail looks just like a leaf. When the animal stays still, often hanging upside down on a tree, it appears to be part of the forest. **You can visit a common leaf-tailed gecko at the Reptile Discovery Center.**



MEGHAN MURPHY/NZP

South America's green anaconda is the world's largest snake. It can grow 29 feet long and weigh 550 pounds.

Fun fact

Fast Food

Rüppell's griffon vultures don't care if their food is fresh. In the wild, they feast on the rotting remains of dead animals. They can down several pounds of meat in just five minutes. Their strong stomachs even handle germs in the decaying flesh. Yucky as this menu may sound, vultures play an important role as nature's clean-up crew, removing carcasses that might otherwise pollute the landscape and spread disease. **You can see Rüppell's griffon vultures at the Cheetah Conservation Station.**



GIL MEYERS/NZP



Courting Cranes

Chris Crowe is aptly named. He's an animal keeper at the Zoo's Front Royal facility—the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute (SCBI)—and his special focus is birds. Not crows, though. He is primarily responsible for their taller and more colorful cousins: cranes.

Crowe spends his days caring for the animals at SCBI, including three species of cranes, logger-head shrikes, and—occasionally—black-footed ferrets. Sometimes he observes an animal's behavior for clues to its health, well-being, and likeliness to reproduce. Other times, he tackles what looks like garden-variety yard work.

"Basically, my job is to make sure the animals have everything they need to feel comfortable, and to breed successfully," Crowe explains. "There's a lot of observation and a lot of behavioral management. But there's also a lot of mowing and weeding. All with the idea of helping the animals breed successfully."

Birds of a Feather

When Crowe arrived at SCBI nearly nine years ago, he already had some crane breeding experience at the U.S. Geological Survey's Patuxent Wildlife Research Center. Now, after nearly a decade working with SCBI's white-naped, red-crowned, and hooded cranes, he's become a full-fledged crane expert.

"It just sort of evolved naturally," Crowe recalls. "They're five feet tall; they're very impressive. And they're very sophisticated in their behavioral displays and vocalizations."

Those sophisticated displays can make it difficult for cranes to breed in zoos; the birds want everything to be

just right, and won't breed otherwise. SCBI is renowned for breeding these birds, including cranes that haven't bred because of physical or behavioral issues. Last year, the SCBI crane team, including Crowe, won an award for their success breeding white-naped cranes.

A white-naped crane named Walnut is a perfect example. Walnut was hand-reared at another zoo, where she imprinted on humans. In her mind she is a human, which makes breeding difficult. When she was sent to SCBI in 2004 (the same year as Crowe), she was 24 years old and had never bred. Most cranes breed by the time they are three or four years old.

Crowe worked closely with Walnut, gaining her trust and training her to be comfortable around him. He did such an impressive job that Walnut considers Crowe her mate.

This trust allows Crowe to artificially inseminate Walnut without restraint, making the process less stressful—for Walnut and the animal care staff—and more productive. Walnut has produced six chicks so far. Since her imprinting means she wouldn't make a good crane mother, her chicks are hatched and raised by experienced pairs of crane foster parents also living at SCBI.

A Wing and a Prayer

Crowe says that he's been interested in animals since he was a child, and wanted to help endangered animals since he was very young.

"I vividly remember visiting Yellowstone National Park when I was young and seeing the bison. I was horrified when I heard that they used to be in the millions, and we nearly wiped them out," Crowe recalls.

"That's the best part of my job: Being around such rare, endangered species, and trying to help them. Getting to be on their side."

— BRITTANY STEFF

