



‘I’m in charge of the vultures’

VICKY FYSON, LONDON ZOOKEEPER, IS BIG ON BIRDS, JUST AS WELL AS SHE HAS 300 TO CARE FOR EVERY DAY

Words ELEANOR WILSON Photography ANNE-MARIE BICKERTON



I’ve wanted to work with animals since I was little. I watched a programme on orangutans when I was about eight years old and instantly fell in love. On my gap year I worked with them in Borneo, and a bit later I helped care for pandas in China. It was then that I realised that mammals are comparatively easy to look after, but it’s much more fun working with birds.

I’m a senior keeper at ZSL London Zoo and I’m in charge of the vultures and the Blackburn Pavilion, where we have more than 300 tropical birds covering 50 different species. It has a walk-through aviary where the birds fly around you and I think it’s probably one of the most relaxing buildings to work in.

We have to count the birds every day. The smallest in the Pavilion are the Timor zebra finches, which weigh about nine grams each. I've done some bird watching but I didn't know how to identify them all before I got here – I had to learn on the job.

One of my favourite birds is Squeaky

Gordon. He's an African pygmy goose, which is technically the smallest duck in Africa, and he's the most ridiculous creature in the world. We call him Squeaky Gordon because of the noise he makes when he runs up to us in the aviary.

Woolly the woolly-necked stork is special: I've known her since she was a chick.

Officially, I don't work with her any more, but when I visit her she'll flirt with me and eat out of my hand. Then there's Xena, the 14-year-old, red-billed toucan, who doesn't like men and won't come out of her tree if she can see one. In January we chop up untreated branches from the recycled Christmas trees and give them to the vultures to make their nests.

I try and get people excited about doves and pigeons because they're my favourites.

I think I like them because no one else does. There are 300 species of pigeon and we have some beautiful ones here, but people think they're just flying rats. If you watch the feral pigeons, their behaviours are amazing: you can see the males and females flirting and I find that really interesting. Most people go to the park to see the ducks, but my partner and I go especially to look at the pigeons.

People like to know what we're feeding the birds and how to tell the males and females

apart. They also like to try and prove us wrong about the animals; it's all about education, so if I manage to convince them I feel like I've done my job. I used to work with the penguins and my favourite question was when someone asked if we gave them live fish. I replied no, and they said, 'Do you drown them first?'.

Originally, I wanted to work in conservation, but I was reluctant to give up my life in London to get more hands-on experience. Some of our birds, like the Socorro doves, are part of breeding programmes to re-introduce birds that are extinct in the wild. ZSL is also a leader of the #OneLess initiative, which encourages people to buy fewer single-use plastic water bottles, and I think the WI's doing a brilliant job with the End Plastic Soup campaign. On social media I see people trying all the time to do their bit, asking things like 'How many times can I wear a jumper before I put it in the wash?'. That sort of thing makes a big difference and it means we're all working for the same purpose.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP Vicky refreshes the plants in the aviary at London Zoo; Xena, the 14-year-old red-billed toucan; feeding Woolly, the woolly-necked stork (also featured in the main picture, opposite page)

My WI is Stroud Green, an urban WI near Islington in London.

We're relatively small with 24 members, but it's a nice group and our meetings are all completely different: this year we've done sessions on mindfulness, making natural dyes and beading. And we have a cake club, which is the best.

I take guests behind the scenes as part of the Keeper for a Day experience. I prefer working with kids rather than adults. Kids don't really know what they want to do but they're excited about it all. I persuade them that animals are the best and we need to take care of the environment – it's also important that they get to like pigeons.

• **Vicky Fyson is a member of Stroud Green WI, Middlesex Federation. Find out more about the #OneLess initiative by visiting: onelessbottle.org**

• **Since our photoshoot, Vicky has welcomed her baby son, Travis, and plans to introduce him to the Zoo's birdlife soon**