



NatSCA

Natural Sciences Collections Association

<http://www.natsca.org>

Biology Curators Group Newsletter

Title: Exhibition Review: Action for Animals

Author(s): Reid, G. M.

Source: Reid, G. M. (1991). Exhibition Review: Action for Animals. *Biology Curators Group Newsletter*, Vol 5 No 7, 81 - 82.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/989>

NatSCA supports open access publication as part of its mission is to promote and support natural science collections. NatSCA uses the Creative Commons Attribution License (CCAL) <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.5/> for all works we publish. Under CCAL authors retain ownership of the copyright for their article, but authors allow anyone to download, reuse, reprint, modify, distribute, and/or copy articles in NatSCA publications, so long as the original authors and source are cited.

Exhibition Review

Action for Animals

An exhibition to celebrate the work and achievements of the RSPCA Leicestershire Museums until 22nd March, then Swansea Maritime Museum

From my early youth, I fondly recall my pet European tortoise 'Roger' (whimsically named after Banister, the first four minute miler). Roger and I had a special symbiotic relationship. I would tempt him with lettuce and - if in a pleasing sort of mood - he would pop his head out from under his shell and eat. Cold, damp Autumn came and Roger, exposed in the garden, caught what appeared to be a cold. Worried, I took my chelonian pal to bed at night in order to keep him warm. Sadly, Roger's head failed to re-appear and my Dad organised a ceremonial burial of the corpse in our back garden, tombstone and all. This tear-stained first experience of the death of an animal left its mark on me. I was puzzled as to why Roger might have died (I dug him up twice just to make absolutely sure) and, at the time, could not conceive that I had been cruel to him in any way.

I guiltily remembered my unintentional maltreatment of Roger when recently viewing 'Action for Animals' in the Leicestershire Museum: an exhibition of images, sound, videos and interactive displays designed to celebrate the achievements of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. The mass mortality of pet tortoises at the hands of an often innocently negligent young British public and the conservation implications for wild tortoise populations led, in 1984, to an RSPCA-inspired statutory ban on importation. Over the last 150 years, similar RSPCA campaigns have undoubtedly played a crucial role in promoting animal welfare legislation to prevent suffering and abuse of all kinds; and in educating the public to a kinder, civilised and more thoughtful approach to animals. The Society originated in about 1822 through a small band of activists (notably including William Wilberforce the anti-slavery campaigner), but it was not granted the prestigious 'Royal' prefix by Queen Victoria until 1840.

The RSPCA exhibition has been created in a somewhat utilitarian 'business fair' style by Graham and Gillies Communications and Henry Lowe Associates. 'Cyberdescence' provide a start framework of scaffolding, dimly illuminated by bulkhead lights. The punchy interpretation is wisely targetted at a key audience of less than 17 years of age: the people who will ultimately determine the future of animal welfare in this country (and possibly elsewhere, through the new RSPCA Eurogroup). An insistent ringing of telephones drew me away from an introductory section featuring a nice taxidermy mount of a cockerel (seized while dying in 1985 during a joint RSPCA-police raid on an illegal cockfighting den). The strident tones came from a bank of three unanswered red telephones in the 'Control Room' display. Picking up a receiver I got all sorts of interesting information about RSPCA emergency animal rescue operations. but the continued din of the two remaining phones make it difficult to absorb fully a message about snowbound cattle. I asked a hovering gallery attendant if he ever found the noise too much to bear. He smiled and said 'No', while confirming that he was personally very hard of hearing.

Near to the telephones I spied a fine display of historical RSPCA collecting boxes, all designed to tug at sentimental heart strings: three kittens stuck on a chimney top, bandaged puppy dogs, mares with foals and an assortment of fluffy bunnies. This traditional sepia-tinted aspect of the RSPCA made a sharp contrast with the full colour interactive video presentation nearby.

'Under or over 17?' the glowing screen demanded to know. Hesitating only briefly, I pressed the right button image. The first menu offered a choice from three topics: farming, animal rescue and the countryside. I tried the last item: 'Which is illegal - gin traps, rabbit snares or domestic mousetraps?'. I correctly selected 'gin traps', then switched to farming: 'How old are broiler chicks when they are slaughtered' (I guessed 20 weeks). 'Wrong! try again'.

I moved from the Control Room area to see the 'Dark Side of Farming' - an RSPCA view of arguably cruel aspects of modern intensive animal husbandry such as tethering pigs in stalls. The video commentary painted a bleak but balanced picture. Battery chickens crowded in small wire cages with a floor area the size of a school jotter - and deprived of exercise, dust baths, natural food and light - certainly contradict the myth about being 'free as a bird'. Of the 38 million egg-laying chickens in Britain, about

96% are kept in these dire circumstances. The RSPCA graphically compare this confinement to expecting three people to live together forever in a telephone booth. Factory farmers argue that the battery method reduces the incidence of disease, cuts labour costs and provides a plentiful supply of eggs at sensible prices. Along with a growing band of people, I am now happy to pay that little bit more for free range eggs.

In the final section of the exhibition, a central tableau of human divers beside an inflatable boat highlights the massive RSPCA rescue campaign in 1988 to save hundreds of sick and dying seals from along our coasts - victims of a distemper virus. The disease is of unknown causation but there is a suspicion that marine pollution may have played a part, or at least in exacerbating the problem. A nearby showcase featuring an oiled seabird was -especially following the Gulf catastrophe - another grim reminder of how cruelty to animals can be brought about simply through a failure to control environmental pollution.

Overall, 'Action for Animals' is very worthwhile. It places the RSPCA in a historical context and shows just how much they have moved on from the soft 'cuddly kitten' image to tackle hard issues in animal welfare involving horrific or undesirable practices both in this country and overseas. From an organisation that twenty years ago concentrated mainly on domestic animals (and, in doing so, perhaps lost its way) emerges a more radical RSPCA prepared to act on critical aspects of zoo and laboratory animal welfare and also deal efficiently with the problems of wild animals. This last point makes 'Action for Animals' especially relevant to natural historians. The exhibition is available for touring and comes with comprehensive literature packs, including well-produced teaching notes and school worksheets. Leicestershire Museums have organised a full series of interesting lectures to accompany 'Action for Animals' and any curator wishing to provide another venue for this exhibition may similarly be able to obtain speakers through the RSPCA, Causeway, Horsham, West Sussex RH12 1HG: Tel. Horsham (0403) 64181.

Gordon McGregor Reid, 12.3.91

Book Reviews

Two softback editions of standard works from Harley Books

The Butterflies of Great Britain and Ireland

Edited by A. Maitland Emmet and John Heath

Volume 7 part 1 of The Moths and Butterflies of Great Britain and Ireland

Softback edition (1990) ISBN 0-946589-37-2 £24.95

Grasshoppers and Allied Insects of Great Britain and Ireland

Judith A. Marshall and E. C. M. Haes

Softback edition (1990) ISBN 0-946589-36-4 £15.95

To my mind, softback is a much more relevant description of these publications than paperback. The latter suggests tattiness, a short active life, and disposability; none of these are characteristics of the books in question. They are superbly produced and will, I am quite sure, withstand long term handling and use. Both have stitched spines and a laminated full colour cover which appears to be waterproof should one wish to take these books into the field.

Alas, there lies the rub. They are still fairly hefty works and at 20.1 x 25.3 cm, they are an awkward size for anything other than desk or bench use. Mind you, they contain far more information than one would wish for in a true field guide so they are perhaps better suited to life on the workbench than life in the rucksack. The illustrations are of such excellent quality that Harley Books might consider the viability of publishing just these with key identification characters alongside as pared down but still attractive pocket-sized field guides which could be used in conjunction with the monographs.

The text for both books is pretty much the same as for the hardback originals. 'Grasshoppers' has new records (to August 1990) noted on pages 13-14, revisions to the VC and island records on page 253, and corrigenda on page 254; there is also an illustration of silhouettes of representative species from each Order covered in the book together with a millimetre scale - presumably to be used in the field although I have stated my reservations about this above. 'Butterflies' has the same brilliant illustrations that were widely commented on when the hardback version was published, and there are a few minor text revisions.