In Memoriam
John Aspinall, 1926-2000

Reflections on one of the zoo world's most eminent 'silver-backs'

Jeremy J.C. Mallinson

'The old order changeth, yielding place to new', but it is difficult now to have to think of the gorilla kingdom, and the zoo world, without the passionate defender of wildlife and the charismatic presence of John Aspinall.

There has been so much published about John's most inspiring and colourful life that it is difficult to resist the temptation to plagiarise some of the worthy writings and observations of others. However, as I have been directly involved in the zoo and conservation world since the late 1950s, and have witnessed so many changes that have taken place over the last four decades or so, I shall attempt to record in this short appreciation, what I consider to be some of the achievements and subsequent influence that John has had on the global zoo community.

I first met John Aspinall at Howletts in the early 1970s, when I had the opportunity to introduce him to the well-respected primatologist, W.C. Osman Hill, who soon became a great admirer of the Zoo Park's many primate breeding successes. Events such as participating in what John referred to as one of his 'posses of wildlifers', at a rally he organised at the Albert Hall in 1972; chairing the first meeting of all holders of lowland gorillas in the United Kingdom and Ireland, in the spacious surroundings of his London gaming club in 1976; presenting papers at the same time as him at international primate meetings at both Hanover and San Diego Zoos; as well as speaking to an 'All Party Select Committee' at the House of Lords with him on the conservation role of both a private and public zoo: all provided me with an invaluable insight into the inspiration, motivation and charismatic personality of a truly remarkable man.

Being aware of the conservation objectives of Howletts almost since its inception, and having been personally involved with Gerald Durrell, my mentor, for a period of over 35 years while reflecting on their respective lives it has been fascinating to note the degree of resemblance between two such outstanding and unorthodox zoo conservation visionaries.

John Aspinall and Gerry Durrell were born within a year of each other in India in the mid-1920s. As far as the animal kingdom is concerned, they also shared many other significant landmarks. In their formative years they both had exotic animals as their household pets. In the late 1950s, they both established their own particular type of zoo, with similar objectives of breeding self-sustaining populations of threatened species. Also, having been inspired in the late 1940s by the magnificance and nobility of London Zoo's lowland gorilla, Guy, by the end of the 1950s they had both personally purchased lowland gorillas to be their house guests, Shamba and Gugis at Howletts and N'Pongo at Jersey, the first members and - in the cases of Shamba and N'Pongo - the founders of the successful colonies of gorillas at both of these breeding centres.

"I suppose I must have entered tiger enclosures :. tens of thousands of times without mishap,' wrote John Aspinall in a caption to this photo. 'What a testimony is that to the enduring dependability and good nature of these great cats!'

In order to put into some type of perspective how the 'Zoo Establishment' regarded such inspirational interlopers, it is interesting to note in Brian Masters' excellent biography, The Passion of John Aspinall (1988), how Sir Solly Zuckerman (later Lord Zuckerman), the Secretary of the Zoological Society of London, had the feeling that Aspinall should not be taken seriously or be encouraged, and how he thought of him as a dilettante. Similarly, Gerald Durrell was never in any doubt that Zuckerman viewed him in almost exactly the same way. However, as Brian Masters related, the unscientific, intuitive methods adopted by Aspinall may have been more fruitful than the orthodox approach. As zoo history now well records, this has very much proved to be the case.

Soon after Gerald Durrell's death in January 1995 at the age of 70, John wrote one of his usual most thoughtful letters to Lee Durrell, saying:

"Though we had a great deal in common, both being born in India of colonial families, my father was a civil engineer with the Bengal Nagpur Raiwlay [G.D. 's father was also a civil engineer and railway builder], both autodidacts, etc., I have no doubt that we would have become friends if our paths had ever crossed. Like Oscar Wilde, he certainly put his talents

into his work and his genius into his life. Genius in both senses, that of capacity and that of spirit. A great man whose apocalyptic vision I share with mounting dread for the fate of the planet. If a dreadful nemesis is in store for our own species I am unconcerned, because we deserve whatever thunderbolts the Gods decide to hurl at us."

Those of us who have had the privilege to visit either Howletts or Port Lympne would have seen the great attention to detail given to the diverse species represented in the two Wild Animal Parks, which have directly resulted from John's passion and desire to do everything possible to provide the best quality of life for the animals that come under their care. In particular, in the way the park environments have taken into full account the psychological and physical well-being of the animals, thereby ensuring that they are being maintained at the highest of standards.

The significant sustained breeding successes of so many endangered species at both Howletts and Port Lympne are greatly respected by those working in the zoo and conservation world. John's private Foundation has recorded many outstanding achievements, in particular in having developed the most prolific and largest gorilla breeding colony in the world. The Foundation's pioneering work with gorillas at the orphange in Congo Brazzaville, its work in the Gabon, has provided the zoo world with an excellent example of how zoos can aid in-country conservation programmes.

John was undoubtedly a maverick of outstanding qualities who lavished his fortune on his passion for animals, with the ultimate aim for them to have a future on his passion for animals, with the ultimate aim for them to have a future on the planet that he shared with them. He, like all true leaders, led by example, in particular through his inspirational innovativeness and entrepreneurial skills. Although there can never be another John Aspinall, I am confident that his guiding spirit will continue to influence the zoo world in its achievement of higher standards for the animals that come under their care.

Like the knights of old, John has thrown down his gauntlet of high conservation principles for others to emulate. And, like all such eminent 'silver-backs', he has demonstrated to the international zoo fraternity what it is possible to nurture if the multi-disciplinary marriage between man and animal can be achieved.

Jeremy Mallinson, Director
Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust
Les Augres Manor, Jersey.

Reprinted from *International Zoo News* Vol.47, No.5 (2000), pp 270-275

The Occurrence of Rusty-Spotted Cat (*Prionalurus rubiginosa*) near Thur-Magra Forest Block in Udaipur City, Rajasthan

Rahul Bhatnagar*, V. S. Rana, Satish Kumar Sharma*****

On August 19, 2000 at about 15 hours one of local forest officer encountered few city boys throwing stones on a small cat at the western shore of Fatehsagar lake near Thur-Magra Forest Block at the outskirts of Udaipur city. He stopped the boys and rescued the cat. Since it was looking wounded and sick, it was taken by him to Udaipur Zoo for treatment. It was identified as the Rusty-spotted Cat (*Prionailurus rubiginosa*). It was kept in the zoo in an isolation chamber for one week and treatment was given by the zoo doctor. After recovery to normal health, it was released back in its natural habitat on August 25, 2000.

Before releasing the animal, its various body measurements were taken for record which are as follows :

Head and body length : 40 cm
Tail length : 23 cm
Height (At shoulder) : 24 cm
Chest girth : 23 cm
Weight : 1.220 Kg
Sex : Male

The Rusty-spotted cat (*Prionailurus rubiginosa*) is the smallest cat of India which is considered one of south Indian species (Gurang & Singh 1996, Gupta, et al, 1985). Distribution of this cat has been confirmed in Madhya Pradesh (Gupta, et al 1985) and Gujarat (Digveerendrasingh, 1987; Pathak, 1990; Chavan, et al, 1991) which are the surrounding states of southern part of Rajasthan. Tehsin (Pers. Com) has also seen a dead Rusty-spotted cat near Udaipur City. Daulat Singh, Range Officer, Tiger Project Sariska (Pers. Com) has also photographed this species in Sariska Tiger Project area, nearly 500 kms away from Udaipur city toward northern side of the state. These observations indicate that Rusty - spotted cat is continuously present from southern Aravallis to the northern Aravallis in Rajasthan and its distribution range is not limited to South India only, but is is continuously present upto Alwar district in North India.

Acknowledgements :
Authors are very grateful to R.G. Soni and A.C. Chaube, for their encouragement and to Raza Tehsin and Daulat Singh for providing information about distribution of Rusty-spotted Cat.

References :

1. Chavan, S.A, C.D. Patel, S.V. Pawar, N.S. Gogate and N.P. Pandya (1999) : Sighting of the Rusty -spotted Cat *Felis rubiginosa* (Geoffroy) in Shoolpaneshwar Sanctuary, Gujarat, *J.Bombay Natural History Society.* 88 (1) : 107 - 108.
2. Digveerendrasingh (1987) : Sighting of a Rusty-spotted Cat (*Felis rubiginosa*). *J. Bombay Natural History Society* 84 (1) : 200
3. Gupta P.D., P.D. Rane and Y.N. Gupta (1985): Lesser Cats in Madhya Pradesh (India) : Status and suggestions for their preservation. *Cheetal* 27 (1&2) : 10-15.
4. Gurung, K.K. and R. Singh (1996) : *Mammals of the Indian Subcontinent.* Indian Experience, Oxford
5. Pathak, B.J. (1990) : Rusty- spotted Cat *Felis rubiginosa* Geoffroy : A new record for Gir Wildlife sanctuary and National Park. *J. Bombay Natural History Society* 87 (3) : 445.

* Deputy Chief Wildlife Warden, Gulab Bagh, Udaipur- 313 001, Rajasthan.
** Asst. Conservator of Forests, Gulab Bagh, Udaipur - 313 001 Rajasthan.
*** Range Forest Officer (NBP), 2, Suresh Nagar, Durgapura, Jaipur - 302 018 Rajasthan