

THE GREAT ANIMAL TAMER

The great 19th century English naturalist Charles Waterton once captured a crocodile by jumping onto its back, seizing its front legs in a judo hold and riding it like a cowboy on a bucking bronco. Asked how on earth he had managed to keep his seat, he replied modestly that he had hunted for some years with Lord Darlington's foxhounds.

Waterton seemed to fear nothing and his bravery made him a legend.

In Guiana he set out to capture a live boa constrictor so that he could examine its teeth. Native guides helped him to grab an ideal victim but were terrified by the huge, thrashing snake. Just as they were about to drop it and run, Waterton whipped off his braces and bound the snake's jaws.

When he eventually settled down in England it was to succeed his father as squire of Walton Hall in Yorkshire.

When he moved into Walton Hall he baffled neighbours by building an eight foot fence around three miles of his estate. Behind it he created a garden which became the first bird sanctuary and wildlife park in the world.

Friends would sometimes call to find he had shinned up one of the immense oak trees and was perched in the topmost branches, watching the birds coming and going and building their nests. His agility was remarkable. He was still scrambling up trees at the age of 80, looking, remarked Norman Douglas the writer 'just like an adolescent gorilla.'

As a young man he once climbed to the top of the angel which surmounts the Castel San Angelo in Rome and entertained the crowds below by standing on the angel's head.

Waterton had a unique relationship with animals. One of the most striking proofs of this was his meeting with an enormous orang-utan at London Zoo.

The orang-utan had just been shipped from Borneo and was proving extremely savage. Waterton asked if he could see it and, gazing at it through the bars was struck by the sadness in its eyes. The curator tried hard to discourage Waterton when he asked permission to go into the cage. A small crowd gathered and watched fearfully as he and the orang-utan came face to face.

The onlookers were astounded to see Waterton and the orang-utan throw their arms around each other and hug with delight. The great ape allowed Waterton to inspect its teeth and the palms of its hands, and returned the compliment by plunging its fingers into Waterton's mouth and appearing to count his molars. The two then sat together and the naturalist submitted to a thorough grooming. They parted with obvious regret and the encounter was the talk of the zoological world.

Waterton's pockets were always bulging with stale bread so that he could feed any hungry bird or squirrel he might meet on his walks.

When he died in 1865 he was buried between two great oaks in the park---and local legend has it that flights of birds followed his coffin to its resting place.