

Free Flying at Taronga Park Zoo

All photography by Animax

Played tourist in your own town recently? Sydneysiders are notorious for neglecting to enjoy all the great things on offer in our fantastic city. One such oversight is not visiting Taronga Park Zoo. For those of us who are parrot lovers or who are curious about birds in general, it's a terrific trip.

A hot tip is to drive to the Bradley Head Road entrance in Mosman and arrive at Taronga at opening time. To beat the crowds, go directly to the top of the Sky Safari entrance and hop aboard for a spectacular ride over the zoo and stunning views of Sydney Harbour. It's such a magnificent vista with un-interrupted skyline views of the Opera House, the Harbour Bridge and the rest of our magnificent city. On a clear day, you'll get a bird's eye view and a feeling of flight.

A different kind of flight can be experienced at Taronga's QBE Free Flight Bird Show. It runs twice daily—at 12:30 and again at 3:00. American bird trainer, Steve Martin, created the show eight years ago. Martin has worked with some of the biggest international zoos and bird shows such as Disney's Animal Kingdom based in Florida.

The Martin connection at Taronga Park Zoo continues to this day, as one of his past trainees is now presenter of the Free Flight show. Grey Fisher has been employed at the show for over eight months. He's had over ten years experience train-

ing birds—the last seven based in Florida. He says he got into bird training purely by accident. "Birds have fascinated me since I was a small child. My grandfather raised pigeons and had game birds like pheasants. In the US I did a degree in Wildlife Management. It was by accident that I ended up as a bird trainer. I got a job at my local zoo and they had a bird show. I really didn't know anything about training birds but they gave me a chance."

Taronga's bird show is designed to be both entertaining and educational. As Grey says, "We have a strong emphasis on conservation. It's an important message to get across to people that these animals have a role in nature and how our actions can negatively impact on their survival. But to get this message across you have to have an entertaining element as well. When people hear the term 'bird show' they'll often think of the type seen at carnivals—parrots dressed up in silly outfits, riding bicycles. That's not what we're about."

One of the show's star birds is Minker the Sea Eagle. She's a magnificent creature and to watch her in flight is spectacular, especially on a windy day. Minker came to the zoo after sustaining a nasty injury. It was while hunting for food that she got her foot caught in a trap. As a result, she had to have several toes amputated and can't be re-released due to her injuries.



Angus the Rufous Owl

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Minker the Sea Eagle

Another of the show's stars is a rare Rufous Owl called Angus. Angus is barely a year old and came to the bird department as a tiny, fluffy chick. "Angus is pretty cool because he's one of the young guys in the show," says Grey. Angus is trained to fly out to a child in the audience and fly back to the handler. Grey's particularly enthusiastic when describing Angus' role. "It's a pretty amazing opportunity for a kid to get so close to one of these birds. We see the excitement on their faces and know they take away something special from the show. I don't think there is anything better than connecting children to wildlife and developing a respect for it."

All training is done through positive reinforcement techniques-lots of food rewards. But as Grey explains, "Not all our birds are trained for the show. Yet it's important for all of them to learn that, like in the wild, they have to do something to earn their food."

Grey feels especially privileged to be working at Taronga. As he explains, "I have the best view and get to work with some incredible birds. I think many people in Australia don't appreciate the magnificent range of birds in their own backyards. Parrots have always been a favourite of mine, especially Cockatoos. When I first got here I kept hearing the term 'silly Galah' which I can't fathom where that would come from. When people come to our show, they'll see our Galahs, Jojo and Jasper, put through their paces. Then they'll realise that Galahs aren't silly at all."

Taronga Park Zoo
Bradley's Head Road
Mosman NSW 2088

QBE Free Flight Show: 12:30pm and 3:00pm daily

General enquiries: 9969 2777
Zoo news: www.zoo.nsw.gov.au
Open every day of the year 9.00am to 5.00pm
Admission: Adults \$30; children (4-15 years) \$16.50;
under 4s free; Seniors & Pensioners \$21



Grey Fisher and Angus



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