



Standouts in a crowd

by Karen Furnweger

Meet Bonito, a green aracari (ahr-uh-SÄHR-ee) who's enchanting guests in Amazon Rising. And say hi to green tree python Jasmine (or is that her sister, Ivy?) in the Islands and Lakes gallery.

They're the newest additions to Shedd's Animal Encounters program, and you can see them, not in a habitat but out and about with an interpreter during scheduled appearances.

Both species are native to tropical canopies, where their hot, bright colors mask them from predators.

But at Shedd, perched on a hand or looped on a tree branch, the bird and snakes really stand out in a crowd.

Bonito is the first tropical bird in the Animal Encounters program, and you're most likely to encounter this bouncy foot-long creature (including 4 1/2 inches of beak) in the natural gathering space under the low-water house in Amazon Rising.

Green aracaris (*Pteroglossus viridis*), the smallest members of the toucan family, are found in the lowland forests of north-eastern South America. Bonito, however, was raised locally by a professional bird breeder who donated him to Shedd.

"Bonito is a very good fit personality-wise for an interpretation animal," she said. "He wants to be around people, he's very curious, he loves to play with toys, and he's very energetic."

Before his public debut, Bonito demonstrated his charms when several staff members visited his reserve area. His space is filled with large sturdy tree limbs, thick climbing ropes and brightly colored parrot toys — a stimulating treescape for this mainly arboreal and totally acrobatic bird.

Making short flights — the physics of that heavy beak oblige toucans to be better climbers than flyers — Bonito landed on heads and shoulders, to the undisguised delight of at least some people in the group. "He loves hair and glasses," Maggie said.

Coaxing him back to a perch, she tossed Bonito a blueberry — one of his favorite foods. She explained that he is almost 100 percent frugivorous, or fruit-eating, and enjoys at least seven selections each day from a menu that includes apples, pears, cantaloupe, honeydew melon, papaya, blueberries, blackberries, green and red grapes, raspberries, plums, a few vegetables such as raw peas and romaine lettuce, and as a treat, strawberries.

the absorption of iron found in plants. Without the dietary tannins, toucans develop hemochromatosis, a potentially lethal accumulation of iron in the liver. In addition to carefully filtering iron from his diet, Maggie adds a pinch of oregano or a few tea leaves to his water bowl for that touch of tannin.

Pesticides are another concern in the bird's almost all-fruit diet. Many of Bonito's favorites are farmed using massive amounts of chemicals and show up on lists of foods containing the highest pesticide residues. In the summer, Maggie shops for organic produce at the Evanston farmers market; in the winter, she hits the health food stores.

For Bonito, food is just another plaything. He popped the blueberry back and forth between his mouth and gullet before it finally disappeared. "These birds like to toss food into the air or mash it up before they eat it," Maggie said. That's because his great big beak delivers far more of a visual impact than a physical one. It's designed for juicy fruits. And lots of them.

"Aracaris have really big appetites for such small birds," Maggie said, and that figures in their important role in the Amazon ecosystem as seed dispersers. As they hop from branch to branch through the canopy, aracaris leave a trail of droppings containing indigestible seeds on the ground below. So not only will guests enjoy watching Bonito eat, but Maggie guaranteed that they'll be treated to a display of his dispersal technique. She carries paper towels.

Sleek and slender, you'd never guess that the green tree pythons, Jasmine and Ivy, have hearty appetites, too. But then, these 3-year-olds are still growing. From their prehensile tails to the heat-sensing pits in their lips, they are equipped for nighttime ambushes of warm-blooded prey in the rain forests of Indonesia and

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"He gets strawberries just once in a while," Maggie explained, "because they're higher in iron than other fruits, and we can't always get organic."

Low-iron and organic are key words. In the wild, toucans get much of their moisture from fruit, but they also drink rainwater that accumulates in the crooks of tree branches, where it picks up natural tannins from the bark.

These tannins, which the birds are physiologically adapted to ingest, limit

Maggie Fahner is Shedd's animal programs collection manager, a bird expert and Bonito's primary tender and trainer. She said that unlike the large toucans, which might like their handlers but not other people, the aracaris can be very sociable.

Photos by Brenna Hernandez and Heidi Zeiger

Oceanarium preview for members, May 16 and 17

We've set aside the weekend of May 16 and 17 for members to take the grand tour of the renovated Oceanarium before it opens to the public. Eat, play and learn in all-new settings. Welcome back your favorite Oceanarium animals, and meet some new faces! View the new 4-D Experience, "Pole to Pole."

The Oceanarium will be open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., and no reservations are required. Admission, of course, is free for members. Additional tickets for guests can be purchased at the membership desk at a special discount of \$23 for adults and \$16 for children and seniors. Share the excitement!

Can't make it preview weekend? Exclusive members-only hours will be scheduled throughout the year for you to enjoy the reimagined Oceanarium.

Take a sneak peak now — construction photos and renderings inside.

