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Fire

Expecting the unexpected gets to be a habit when running a zoo. But on a balmy spring night soon after we opened in 2007, whilst walking Leon, our enormous, fearless mountain dog around the zoo doing our last rounds, I was really taken by surprise.

Walking near the zoo's workshop, there was a new sound, an odd snap crackle and pop, which sounded like it needed investigating urgently. I rounded the corner and saw with amazement that six foot flames were dancing around a fifteen foot hole in the side of the workshop, lighting up the sky. The snap crackle and pop was the workshop roof, fuelled by the crispy dry wooden walls, parched after a long unseasonal dry patch.

It was a vivid scene and for a second I contemplated it, whilst trying to work out what to do next. The welding equipment, including a four foot bottle of propane gas, and a six foot canister of pure oxygen, was inside that building. At the moment they were a long way from the flames, but as I took out my phone to call the fire brigade, I calculated that in the twenty or so minutes it would take them to arrive, that situation could change dramatically.

Andy Goatman, our knackerman who supplies meat for the carnivores, owned the welding equipment, and once assured me that if those two canisters went up together, they would shoot 200 feet into the air, showering the area with flames. That would be bad, I thought.

I ran to the hose in the yard, but its piddling domestic water pressure meant that I had to get up close and personal with the flames. The only way to do this was to clamber on to a skip of metal for recycling, a tangle of rusting bars and springy chain link mesh. This gave me enough height to reach the flames with the water jet, and also to contemplate the cause of the fire. The blazing hole in the side of the workshop was spanned by a web of wiring, fizzing around the junction box in the middle of the gap, like an angry tarantula, sparking and hissing when spray landed on it.

It was all still live, and I was standing on a metal skip with water running down my arms. I aimed the hose systematically behind the fire, damping down the timbers within reach of the flames, and slowly worked my way inwards. I angled the hose carefully, as 415 volts, at 360 amps, is definitely fatal if the current jumped.

And then my phone rang. Three minutes into the situation, I was still adjusting to it. So I foolishly took the call. On the line was Karen, the zoo's lawyer, wanting to pass on some advice about our HR policy. "Is it a good time to talk?" she asked. "Bit busy," I snapped back. "But shoot." But as the double glazed window at the edge of the hole exploded and showered the metal skip with hot fragments of glass, I realized that I couldn't multitask this. "I'd better call you back," I said, and put the phone back in my pocket.

At last I heard the sound of the fire truck arriving. By now I was inside the workshop where most of the flames were under control, apart from a newly creosoted shed against the wall, which resolutely refused to go out. I could also see flames licking their way under the upper floor, and there was no way I could reach them with my hose. But no firemen came to help.

And then I heard the barking. It was Leon, doing his job to the utmost of his ability, refusing to allow these obvious intruders to get out of their big, red burglary wagon. "Leon," I belted. "It's the fire brigade. We kind of need their help." I locked Leon in the veg room, and

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the firemen piled out with their equipment. The Fire chief was measured in his assessment, but as the crew doused the area with high pressure water, more of the spray began sparking around the exposed wiring. We turned off the main supply into the building, but the lights stayed on. In the end we had to shut down the entire electrical supply to the park, something not done lightly as the tigers, lions, bears and wolves are all deterred from approaching the fence by electric fences. Luckily, our newly installed battery back up system, which powers the fences for 48 hours, sprang into life, and the firemen calmly put out the fire.

Seven years later, the entire park has been re-wired up to modern standards, the workshop has a new roof, and electrical safety checks are carried out monthly. To this day I get reminded by Tim, our Health and Safety Officer, not to tackle an electrical fire on my own. But at least we still have a workshop.

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Ostrich Mayhem

Peter was used to being the only ostrich at the zoo, and strode around with quiet dignity, for a long time the only African animal in the designated African paddock, which one day we hope will house giraffes. But Peter didn't know that he was an ostrich. When four more of his kind arrived one day, Peter's world was thrown into confusion. And a confused ostrich is something to behold.

Now, Ostriches are not the sharpest tools in the box, but it is hard to imagine one more stupid than Peter, who has spent most of his life believing that he is an alpaca. He followed the five alpacas around, eating pretty much what they ate, hanging out with them. And when the alpacas sat down to chill, Peter sat down and chilled too.

Imagine his surprise when a horsebox arrived in the middle of his six acre paddock, and four gangly adolescent ostriches gingerly stepped out, with the trepidation of aliens exploring a new planet.

The word Oblivious, and Ostrich, go together well. Watching Peter at the far end of the paddock, staring in the wrong direction, it could be said that he was truly oblivious, on a number of levels. Yet Peter was about to give an object lesson in the relatively sophisticated post-Freudian concept of Denial. People think that ostriches bury their heads in the sand when faced with a tricky problem, but they don't. They do what Peter did, which was to move gradually towards this inexplicable, slow motion invasion, jerking his head around with increasing incredulity, until he reached the nearest fellow member of his species. Twelve months ago, she was an egg. Now she was seven feet tall, and eye to eye with Peter.

Peter 'thought' about this for a nano-second, with his brain smaller than the eye which took in the scene before him. Then he promptly kicked her in the chest, and galloped back to the bottom of the paddock, swerving wildly to his position by the fence, to stare out into the distance, where there were no other ostriches, and he could be an alpaca again.

A crowd of visitors watched this scene unfold, and as the day drew to a close they filed down the drive smiling. But Peter's kick had sent unseen shockwaves into a situation which was far from over.

What we didn't know until they arrived was that one of the female ostriches, Mildred, was actually on full time medication for mood swings, an antidepressant akin to Prozac, which she had to be given every day. "They just dropped that in at the last minute," said Colin, our implacable curator, with twenty years of Safari park experience behind him. "Said you give it to her by hand and she takes it every day to keep her calm."

She'd already been given a double dose to get her through the journey, a routine precaution when transporting animals. But clearly this wasn't enough. The ricochets of Peter's kick, coupled with the unfamiliarity of her surroundings, sent Mildred into a spin, and she gradually wound herself up, gaining momentum, and whipping the others into a panic.

Within half an hour she was racing along at the top fence, crashing into the vestibule at the end. Colin assembled the keepers around the perimeter as the situation became more serious. Suddenly she veered straight towards the fence and into the hotwire stand-off, designed

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to stop strong African animals testing the fence directly. The three inch post holding the wire snapped off at the ground as she hit it with her sternum, and she didn't even slow down.

I ran to get the riot shield, kindly supplied by the police for tricky situations like this, acutely aware that with visitors still on site, this could quickly develop into a Code Red.

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Animal Magic

Amidst the complexities of running a zoo, sometimes the only respite comes from the animals themselves. The soothing effects of the animals is brought home to me particularly when showing them to people for the first time. Even tigers – our tigers, Vlad and stripe at least – have a calming effect when meeting them.

I recently had the privilege of introducing Vlad and Stripe to Matt and Ozzie, two war veterans who are setting up a fledgling charity to help other ex-servicemen with Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome, the crippling psychological after-effects of being in battle.

Matt is a stocky bull of a man, a builder now, but one who dips in and out of a genuine thousand yard stare as he recounts his struggles with adjusting to civilian life. Ozzie is a Londoner, who has been in a war I haven't asked him about, but which he survived physically, and apparently psychologically intact. He ran a successful business for two decades years before the PTSD kicked in, with flashbacks and cold sweats, filling him with a mortal fear for no apparent reason.

Now, Ozzie exudes a steady, gentle calm and ready smile of the trained counselor that he has become. It's hard to imagine him in a battle. It's also hard not to imagine him suddenly dropping his cockney accent, pirouetting on one foot and singing "I believe in miracles!..", because Ozzie looks exactly like Errol Brown from Hot Chocolate (sorry, Ozzie. I can't believe I wrote that down without telling you I thought it first).

I stood with Matt and Ozz up by the tigers, and we watched these two massive amiable cats, each one as heavy as the three of us together, cruising past the fence, chuffing their hellos, and nuzzling each other affectionately. In the afternoon sunshine, with a breeze shifting through the trees, we stayed for a couple of hours, making plans about bringing other servicemen into this calming environment, where nature does part of the healing for you.

It was very moving, watching these two men soaking up the rare experience of being so close to such majestic animals, like giving water to people who had just crossed a desert. These two men really had been across a desert, in a war, and now the animals inside them needed help and reassurance that things were back to normal. Being in the zoo, close to nature, with animals and plants all around, carrying out practical tasks that they can do well, like building paths and mending fences, will play an invaluable part in their rehabilitation.

Although zoos are known for their conservation work, and the education and research they carry out into endangered animals, something which is only just being explored is the effects that zoos have on the people who visit them, and the staff and volunteers who work there. Zoos are often by their nature a therapeutic environment, with calming natural surroundings, and glimpses of animals through the tress.

Dartmoor Zoo has been selected as part of a government scheme launched next year to promote the health benefits of visiting zoos, something which will help us grow, as well as the people who visit. We already take referrals from GPs for people with mild depression, instead of giving them medication.

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People sometimes ask me if I'm proud of what has been achieved at the zoo, but I genuinely don't have time for that. It's a massive joint effort, and I'm just the custodian, helping the zoo to get to the next stage in its development. If I can help it to fulfill its full potential during my tenure here, then maybe one day, perhaps, I will have time to be proud.