

TRISTEN BIRD - STAFF PROFILE

A combination of the right skills, experience and passion – as well as a healthy dose of a phenomenon called nominative determinism – have lead Melbourne Aquarium to the perfect Bird Curator for its new Antarctica exhibit.

When Melbourne Aquarium embarked on the exhaustive search for a Bird Curator to head up its new \$28 million Antarctica exhibit, there were a number of common, yet important, terms and qualities that were used as benchmark criteria to uncover the perfect candidate.

Taking care of Australia's first collection of sub-Antarctic penguins – five King and 13 Gentoo penguins – would require someone skillful and experienced. Entertaining and educating thousands of visitors each day would demand the qualities of passion and dedication. However, there was another term that would prove to be an equally important piece of the puzzle for the perfect Bird Curator. It is a phrase less well-known, but far more subliminal and possibly based on fate and destiny – nominative determinism.

The term nominative determinism may not instantly ring bells, but once explained, your mind will be racing with a myriad of examples you have experienced in your own world. The term was created and popularised in the British magazine *New Scientist* and refers a phenomenon where people's names suggest key attributes of their professions, personalities or passions – with the implication that their names have influenced their existence.

The original *New Scientist* article referred to books written about the North and South Poles by Daniel Snowman and the London underground by Richard Trench, as well as an article on incontinence authored by J Splatt and D Weedon in the *British Journal of Urology*. *New Scientist* readers wrote in with a whole host of real-life occurrences including meat marketer Chris Lamb, prostate surgeon Dr Dickie and plant researcher Mark Flowers. The most high-profile example in recent times is surely Jamaican sprinter Usain Bolt, who was lightning quick on his way to becoming the world's fastest man and an Olympic gold medal at Beijing earlier this year.

One might reasonably assume that Melbourne Aquarium has already benefited from the powers of nominative determinism, as it employs a guy called Ivor as the Head Diver. But it appears the phenomenon's influence has grown in strength over time, as the person chosen as the inaugural Bird Curator is Tristen Bird.

Surname puns aside, Tristen is a highly-experienced bird keeper, who has an extensive knowledge-base after working at a number of major zoos in all corners of Australia, such as Melbourne Zoo, Adelaide Zoo, Taronga Zoo and Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary. The professionalism and passion for birds that Tristen has displayed throughout his career has been rewarded with his dream job of working with sub-Antarctic penguins.

Surely, Tristen's curriculum vitae is enough to silence those nominative determinism conspiracy theorists. That is, until he drops the bombshell that there is a history of aviculture from the family relatives who have passed down the Bird name. Should we be coining a new term – generational nominative determinism?

“On my father's side of the family, my grandfather Maxwell Bird was a champion homing pigeon breeder and racing enthusiast. He also used to breed a wide variety of exotic poultry species, such as ducks for show, geese and various passerines,” Tristen said.

As if his surname and the exploits of his dad's family wasn't enough to feed his passion for these animals, Tristen amazingly explains that there are also a number of relatives in his mum's family with an aviculture background.

“On my mother's side, my grandfather Lionel Aplin was a keen bird hobbyist with a particular interest in canaries. He gave me my first book, *The Reader's Digest Guide to Australian Birds*, which is actually still my favourite book of all time.

“My uncles Darrel, Ian and Mark were mad aviculturists and they used to run a bird breeding business. Darrel still to this day has one of the largest bird collections that I have ever seen – he even houses species that zoos don't have,” he said.

These extremely fortunate family circumstances and the competitive advantages it has created in his chosen career are certainly not lost on Tristen, as he proclaims that it allowed him to gain a solid knowledge base and learn a great deal about bird husbandry and care from a very young age.

Armed with all the family trade secrets, Tristen has worked hard and travelled extensively to carve his own niche. His first venture outside the family nest was a voluntary position at Gorge Wildlife Park in the Adelaide Hills and his aviculture career started flying during a two-year tenure as a Bird Keeper at the Gold Coast's Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary.

He then spread his wings across the continent, from the sunshine state to Sydney's Taronga Zoo and Adelaide Zoo, before landing in Melbourne to work for Zoos Victoria. As second-in-charge of the Bird Department at Zoos Victoria, Tristen was responsible for looking after 103 different species, the management of breeding schedules, development of bird training programs such as free flight presentations and training staff with his diverse knowledge.

After taking care of more than 100 different species in his previous position, it would be logical to assume that looking after two species from the same scientific family in Melbourne Aquarium's new Antarctica exhibit should be relatively comfortable, right? Tristen explains this perception is certainly not the reality.

“Penguin husbandry methods differ vastly from the techniques employed for most other birds, particularly in regards to the environments that they live in. Preserving a penguin system is more like maintaining a large aquarium, which is far more delicate than the planted habitats that I have previously worked with,” he said.

He is amazed by the delicate life support systems that sustain the exhibit and the penguins. Melbourne Aquarium has employed a number of innovative techniques and state-of-the art technologies to recreate the penguin's natural environment as closely as possible.

The exhibit features a temperature controlled environment that can be set at different levels between minus-2 and plus-5 degrees Celsius and a thick layer of snow and ice covers the exhibit's base. It has a specially-installed lighting cycle that changes to replicate the Antarctic seasons, with very short days in winter and very long days in summer. There is also a 100,000 litre pool, which allows the penguins to dive for their food as they would do in the wild.

Tristen continues to explain some of his other new challenges by highlighting that each of the penguins has a distinct and strong personality and display characteristics that you would never find in any other bird species.

"The Gentoos are active little characters with an amazing supply of energy. They have curious and outgoing personalities and are happy to investigate and interact with anything new. They are also very vocal – often calling out to each other with a honking sound or singing together in a loud chorus.

"Contrastingly, the Kings are the more regal and majestic of the two species. They can sometimes be quite aloof in nature and they tend to stick together in a group, ignoring their cheeky Gentoos. They are probably the more visually stunning of the species and their vibrant yellow-orange colouring makes them mesmerizing animals to watch," Tristen said.

While it would be easy to think that looking after these wonderful penguins provides a work environment that is always entertaining, it is when Tristen runs through a normal working day you realise that it's not all fun and games. He arrives at 7.00am every morning and the first thing he does is get changed into thick, warm clothes and gumboots in preparation for the bone-chilling temperature of his work space.

"When you work in subzero temperatures, you learn the importance of wearing lots of layers – I generally wear thick socks, thermals, a fleecy jumper, thick gloves and a beanie," he said.

Tristen then undertakes a series of tasks, which he refers to as "all the hard work", that the lay person probably doesn't necessarily think about when thinking about working with penguins or their pristine Antarctica exhibit.

This hard work includes shovelling, raking and distributing fresh snow, cleaning and scrubbing the exhibit's rocks and surfaces, conducting water quality testing in the pool and undertaking what Tristen describes as the worst of all the tasks – cleaning up all the penguin poo.

Once the exhibit is spotless Tristen turns his attention to the penguins and he is most definitely in his element while interacting with these majestic and playful birds.

"I really love feeding time and the bond I have with the penguins. I prepare and deliver the morning food for the penguins, which is usually fish such as herring. I also feed the penguins in the afternoon through a surface feed at the pool, where they are fed smaller fish such as sprats or baby salmon.

"I also interact with the penguins at other times during the day with tasks such as observing and recording their behaviour, weighing them and playing games as a part of their enrichment programs.

"I am very lucky to have 18 very excited penguins run up to meet me each morning – it's such a great start to your day. The most amazing feelings are when the penguins sing to you," Tristen concluded.

While there might be only a handful of Bird Curators in Australia, Tristen's job is one that is completely unique as he is the only person in the nation to head up a team responsible for the safe keeping of sub-Antarctic penguins.

Who knows whether nominative determinism, fate or destiny have played their part, but there is no doubting that Tristen's expert knowledge, dedication to aviculture and passion for these penguins prove that he is perfect for this position.

Melbourne Aquarium's Antarctica exhibit featuring King and Gentoo Penguins is one of four amazing worlds to discover and enjoy at Melbourne Aquarium along with Weird & Wonderful, Adventure Island and Sharks Alive.

FAST FACTS

Name:	Tristen Bird
Age:	31
Birthplace:	Adelaide, South Australia
Residence:	Melbourne CBD, Victoria
Occupation:	Bird Curator at Melbourne Aquarium
Qualifications:	TAFE Certificate III in Zoo Keeping. Currently studying Diploma of Ornithology
Hobbies:	Music, hiking and travelling the world