

In October 2001 Monkey World sent one of our keepers, Wendy Durham, to Highland Farm Gibbon Sanctuary (HFGS) in Thailand to work with their keepers and gibbons. Wendy's trip was short but provided valuable insight into ways in which Monkey World could help with gibbon rescue and rehabilitation in future. So, in January 2002 we decided to send out the next Monkey World keeper, Paul Budgen, with enough finances to build HFGS's new enclosure for a pair of gibbons. The following report is an amalgamated diary of Wendy and Paul's work in Thailand.

HFGS is a permanent home to 36 gibbons of four different species: lar gibbons, pileated gibbons, golden-cheeked gibbons and white-cheeked gibbons. The sanctuary is located in the north west of Thailand, roughly 44kms south of Mae Sot near the Burmese border. The farm covers nearly 40 acres and is owned and run by Bill and Pharanee Deters. Their aim is a simple one, to give sanctuary to any gibbon that is in need. At the sanctuary the gibbons receive medical treatment, they are assessed behaviorally, and then individuals are paired together where they can grow and learn about how to live as a gibbon again.

In October of 2001 I (Wendy) spent a week working at HFGS. My first day was spent meeting the gibbons and learning about their backgrounds. All of them shared the same tragic beginning in life. Adult females carrying infants are shot out of the trees and their babies are taken and sold as pets or into the tourist trade. As the gibbons grow they become strong and highly territorial and at adolescence they usually start to bite and become a real danger to their owners. Attempting to keep them docile, owners often try drugging or pulling their teeth and when these tactics fail the gibbons are often drowned. Lucky individuals find a permanent home at HFGS here they are cared for, with understanding for the rest of their lives.

Just before my arrival HFGS had received a report of two gibbons being kept as pets at the Mae Hong Son province (1000km north of Mae Sot). The town of Bang Ma Pla had one main street with several small shops so the gibbons were not difficult to find. Tied to a tree by a length of rope was a small black lar gibbon named Ooey. She was approximately 3 years old, playful, curious, and extremely friendly. While Pharanee found the owner of the shop, I was busily taking photographs as Ooey had come down from her perch. It was then that the smaller of the two gibbons, Coffee made his appearance. He was approximately 6-7 months old and clung to Ooey as if she was his mother.

Pharanee showed the owner some photographs of the HFGS and warned her that Ooey would soon become strong, territorial and start to bite her family. She had bought the gibbons from a poacher on the Burmese border for about 800 Baht each. Sadly, the owner refused to give the gibbons up as her children were very attached to them and they were still easy to handle. All Pharanee could do for now was to ask if it would be alright to keep in touch and visit from time to time. The owner agreed and she was left with HFGS contact in case she had any problems with the two gibbons.

For the gibbons, I had brought along some worming medication from Monkey World. Each morning the gibbons were given a warm milky drink and this was the obvious way to get the worming medication into them. Most took their medication drinks happily, unaware that there was a hidden agenda. I also worked with the HFGS staff to do maintenance work on some of the cages to cut and flatten sharp wires that had worked free. We also replaced fallen bamboo and secured ropes and swings. While mine was only a short visit, I was able to help medicate some of the 36 gibbons, repair some cages, and see for myself the sad and illegal gibbon pet trade.

January 2002. Following Wendy's visit, I (Paul) was asked to go to HFGS on behalf of Monkey World, to construct a new enclosure and carry out some renovations on existing enclosures. Designs for the new enclosure were first worked out at Monkey World and I then began source materials in Mae Sot. Once in Thailand, I discussed with Bill and Pharanee, the proposed enclosure and we chose a site on a hillside near to some existing enclosures. While this was an ideal spot for the enclosure it presented two problems: it was on a slope and one tree would have to be included with in the enclosure.

After ordering the materials, I began to carry out some work on existing enclosures with the assistance of HFGS staff. Most importantly we built safety porches on some enclosures to allow daily maintenance by the staff without coming into direct contact with the gibbons. By the end of my first week in Thailand, the materials for the new enclosures began to arrive and the task of building the new enclosure began. 56 galvanized steel tubes for the frame lay in a pile on the ground and we all wondered how they would come together to for a home for a pair of gibbons.

Steady progress was made throughout the next 2 weeks as the enclosures took shape in the yard. Once I was satisfied that the structure was sound, it had to be partially dismantled to be moved to the chosen site and erected on its legs one meter off the ground, around the tree. With the frame properly sited, the remainder of the construction progressed much more quickly. A small safety porch was erected next to the enclosure and the finishing touches such as fitting it out with sleeping quarters, swings, bamboo poles and a rope ladder were completed at 5:30pm on my last full day at HFGS. The final task of transferring a pair of gibbons, called Mama and Noi, was completed on my last morning.

I felt very satisfied with what had been achieved during my brief visit and pay tribute to my team of very enthusiastic staff. In addition to constructing the enclosure, another had been fully renovated, two safety porches had been built, numerous minor repairs had been carried out, forty new food basket brackets were designed and purchased, and all the primates had been given worm treatment – all courtesy of Monkey World. Did I enjoy the experience? ...I wouldn't have missed it for the world!