

# Part 1: Interview with Dr. James Gilardi

## Executive Director of the World Parrot Trust

by Charlie Moores

*Dr. James Gilardi has been the Executive Director of the World Parrot Trust since November 2000. His work includes developing and implementing field conservation initiatives. He is a conservation biologist specializing in behavioural and physiological ecology with special interest in tropical forest birds and marine vertebrates.*

*Following undergraduate studies at UC Santa Cruz, he earned a Ph.D. in Ecology from UC Davis studying parrot social behaviour, foraging ecology, and soil-eating in south-eastern Peru. James has also worked on parrot field conservation in Guatemala, St. Vincent, St. Lucia and Mexico.*

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[Charlie Moores]

Did you always want to work with parrots or have you just found yourself in the position you are and sometimes wonder how you got there?

[Dr. Gilardi]

Since early childhood, I've been fascinated by all birds because they were the most spectacular and observable wildlife I could find in suburban California. Tame parrots were all the more fascinating as they seemed as curious about me and my world as I was in them and theirs. When a neighbour was giving up a parrot in the process of moving, I was thrilled to adopt my first pet – a conure or parakeet from Central America (*Aratinga canicularis*). Only many years later in Guatemala did I get to see and study this species in the wild, learning that they nest in arboreal termite mounds and fly powerfully in spectacular tropical forests.

I first started my graduate research on tropical seabirds in the central Pacific, but switched to working on parrot ecology and conservation when I came to understand just how threatened the parrots were as a family, and how little we understood of their biology. That seemed (and seems) a thrilling and meaningful combination.

[Charlie Moores]

You mentioned there about coming to understand just how threatened the parrots are as a family. Do you think there is sufficient understanding among birders about the problems facing the world's parrots?

[Dr. Gilardi]

I've been told there is a bit of a disconnect between birding and conservation in general, so my hat is off to you and others like you working to educate and inspire birders to get more deeply involved in saving what they love.

When it comes to parrots, my sense is few birders - or conservationists in general for that matter – have a solid perspective of just how many parrots are seriously threatened, and how many have gone extinct in the last few centuries. A quick look through the Threatened Birds of the World tells you very quickly just how disturbingly over-represented parrots are as a family.

This issue also hits home when we compare notes with our conservation colleagues who are often talking about their “threatened” birds, apes, or elephants numbering in the tens or even hundreds of thousands – for many parrots, we’re looking at hundreds of individuals left, even tens in some extreme cases. For parrots, extinction is not hypothetical, for many species, it’s an immediate reality.

[Charlie Moores]

I don't get to talk to the numbers of the general public that you do, but I get the impression that many/most non-birders view parrots in a very stereotypical way - that they 'talk', are colourful, make good pets etc. That they're almost not typical 'birds'. Is that your impression?

[Dr. Gilardi]

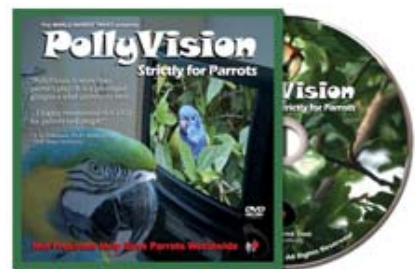
You are absolutely right, and even some birders see wild parrots as not really birds – something to do with one squawk sounding much like another! As you’ll note from our magazine, the PsittaScene, from our video productions, and from our website, we definitely try to encourage people to see and understand parrots as they would any wild bird, even if the bird is sitting on their shoulder and whispering sweet nothings in their ear.

[Charlie Moores]

Assuming you want to change that view, specifically how do you go about it when the media constantly re-enforces that stereotype by almost invariably showing parrots with 'owners' or in cages?

[Dr. Gilardi]

A few years ago, we released a video called [PollyVision: Strictly for Parrots](#) – it’s all footage parrots in the wild edited expressly for parrots to watch. While most parrots do in fact enjoy watching it - and enrichment is in fact a serious issue for most captive parrots - we had an ulterior motive as well. Most people – even those who share their lives with parrots in their homes - have never seen a wild parrot, nor have they seen a parrot in flight! After watching wild parrots for over an hour on PollyVision, we found that people quickly developed a new appreciation for these birds as wild animals. Following on that success, we’ve just released a sequel PollyVision II: Parrots of the Americas which is already selling very well in the EU and USA – of course all proceeds go to parrot conservation and welfare.



PollyVision DVD: Strictly for Parrots

[Charlie Moores]

Why do you think so many people want to own a parrot?

[Dr. Gilardi]

I think anyone who has spent any time around a well-adjusted captive parrot finds them to be phenomenally engaging, amusing, and beautiful creatures. Given that humans all over the world have kept parrots - since pre-historic times in some cases -it's pretty clear that human enchantment with these birds is quite universal. The reasons for this are many, but certainly their intelligence and social skills are high on the list.

[Charlie Moores]

Most experts I've talked to say that parrots don't actually make good 'pets' because they are so intelligent and highly social: do you agree/disagree?

[Dr. Gilardi]

Most parrots don't make good pets for most people, I agree. There are, however, tens of millions of parrots in captivity right now, and they live a long time, so they're here with us for the foreseeable future, whether they are bred or not. Many of these birds need better homes than they currently have, so we encourage people to learn about their needs, figure out if they can provide a good home for a parrot, and if it still looks like a good fit, to then adopt or foster a parrot in need.

[Charlie Moores]

If I'm honest I have quite rigid personal views about keeping parrots in cages. Did you start out with rigid views of your own (not necessarily about keeping parrots in cages), do you still have them, are you more the sort of person who generally sees both sides of an argument, or given your experiences have you altered or softened your views?

[Dr. Gilardi]

I can understand and respect a wide range of views on the question of parrots as pets, parrots in cages, etc. Personally, between the ages of ten and thirty I had taken on several unwanted parrots before really contemplating this issue – it was a moot point, the birds needed homes, I had at the time, the space, and the interest to improve their lot, so it seemed like a no-brainer.

Over the years, I've heard a number of well-articulated arguments in support of the wild bird trade. I can respect some of those views if they are honest (and not too self-serving), but in the end, it is hard to imagine feeling good about catching millions of wild birds and putting them in cages for human amusement. That just seems so 19<sup>th</sup> Century to me ... and if that's the only way we can find for local people to make a go of it in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century - e.g. the ubiquitous 'livelihoods' argument - we're just not being creative enough.



Pet parrot interacting with its owner. © World Parrot Trust. All rights reserved.

Captive bred birds are of course an entirely different story; many parrot species thrive in captive environments, live complex and stimulating lives, and often for longer than their wild counterparts. In this context, my sense is that it's important to bear in mind that life in the wild is no picnic. I'm sure we've all watched birds nervously going to roost, every night fearing for their lives, or getting eaten by a predator (sometimes while still alive), to know that all living things face a variety of challenges on a daily basis, no matter where they live.

[Charlie Moores]

Given that human over-population is behind most if not all environmental problems facing the planet's wildlife, what's the greatest specific threat facing parrots as a result: habitat destruction, climate change, or hunting and collection for the pet trade - or is it not possible or desirable to over-generalise: there are many reasons and each species is impacted differently.

[Dr. Gilardi]

It's easy to oversimplify such complexity, particularly when talking about 340+ species, but there is no question that the vast majority of threatened (and extinct) parrots would be far better off today if humans didn't "love" them so much. Valuable parrots often disappear from the wild long before the forest is cut. So, as a specific threat, the pet trade is far and away the biggest concern. Of course, this has inspired the Trust's focus on stopping the legal and illegal trade in wild parrots around the world.

Habitat loss is important for many reasons, but it's important to bear in mind how many parrots, including endangered species, are quite flexible in this regard, and manage quite well in human-altered landscapes. The 5000+ Amazon parrots thriving in Los Angeles are but one of many demonstrations of some parrots' incredible flexibility and resilience.



Feral Green-cheeked Amazon offspring due to fledge in Los Angeles, CA. © Bowles/Erickson.

[Charlie Moores]

That's quite a thought. When you look at LA or Miami is there a particular species of threatened wild parrot that's becoming so common in the US as an exotic, that its population is becoming internationally important?

[Dr. Gilardi]

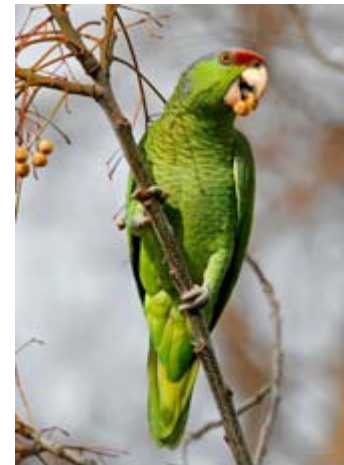
It's also quite a sight! The short answer is "yes," but of course it depends on what you mean by "important." In Florida, the most ecologically and economically significant parrot populations are the Monk Parakeets

(aka Quakers) which now number in the hundreds of thousands. This species is not threatened in the wild, but their growing presence in FL is becoming significant, so far mostly because they often build their huge nests (the only parrot that builds a stick nest!) of power poles.

In LA, there are large and growing numbers of two threatened Amazon parrots which hail from Mexico. It remains unclear whether either could make a significant contribution to the recovery of the species in the wild, particularly because there is a fair amount of observed hybridization among Amazon species there.

But these LA birds are important for another reason. They create a great opportunity to show Americans and our visitors that parrots fly, parrots can be beautiful, and that parrots can live in harmony with people - even in densely populated places like Los Angeles. [Watch video of Amazon Parrots feeding in Los Angeles.](#)

That's becoming a crucial message for many of our conservation projects around the world – parrots and people need not conflict, they often do not, and when it works, it's delightful to experience. The recent film, "The Parrots of Telegraph Hill" is but one outstanding example of this welcome change in our thinking about parrots and people.



Feral Lilac-crowned Amazon in Los Angeles, CA. © Bowles/Erickson.

[Charlie Moores]

In your opinion can parrots ever legitimately be viewed as a 'resource' (eg as food, income for poor communities through sales to the pet trade, ecotourism)?

[Dr. Gilardi]

We generally view parrots, whether captive or wild, as valued rather than valuable, something to learn from, enjoy, and protect when necessary. I suppose by definition, you could call them a 'resource' regardless of whether they are being used in a way which is ethical, sustainable, consumptive, etc. That is, if someone takes pleasure in watching wild birds, they are effectively a resource. Clearly, non-consumptive uses stand a much better chance of achieving long-term sustainability, meaningful incomes, and a positive relationship between communities and their wildlife.

But your question raises a deeper philosophical issue. In the developed world, where we've been disconnected from the natural world for centuries and more, we tend to think of the natural world as a collection of stuff to use for our own purposes, as resources. When talking to people about plants, insects, birds, etc. you often hear the question, "but what's it good for, what is its purpose"? I always find that question tricky to answer because it rests on the implicit assumption that things on the Earth were put here for us. While that view may sit well with our Judeo-Christian-Muslim culture (because all harken back to the Book of Genesis), it doesn't sit particularly well with the science of ecology and evolution because the available evidence is all very much to the contrary.

Nor for that matter does it sit well with many other cultures which live closer to Nature. Indigenous people - and surely our ancestors as well - feel that they are an integral part of the world they live in. On the one hand, of course their very survival depends on their use of local 'resources,' but on the other, there is a strong tendency to view the plants and animals in a more neighbourly and respectful light.

We tend to arrive on the scene and 'teach' indigenous people how to extract these 'resources,' and guess who ends up with the cash? Surely there is a lot of learning to be done in both directions, but I suspect we would gain a great deal by understanding and perhaps emulating their respect for Nature.

[Charlie Moores]

Are most threats to parrots deliberate or incidental - ie deliberate in the sense of collection, or incidental in the sense of habitat loss through things like forest clearance to grow food for people?

[Dr. Gilardi]

Mostly deliberate in recent years, and mostly created by demand from the developed countries for cheap wild parrots. Now that the USA and EU have banned the importation of wild parrots, and many exporting countries are changing their policies, there is hope that this deliberate threat will soon become a thing of the past.

[Charlie Moores]

Therefore, is the answer to saving the world's parrots education, legislation, or both?

[Dr. Gilardi]

Of course there is never one single answer ... or the single answer is something along the lines of, "everything that works." All situations are different and solutions generally involve different sets of tools appropriate for that specific situation. Often the political, cultural, and biological considerations in a given scenario make it pretty obvious from the start what's likely to work and what is not, but it's crucial to keep an open mind and try creative solutions whenever possible.

Part Two: Coming in Flock Talk January 2009

*Charlie Moores is a writer, photographer, and world birder extraordinaire. The interview is for 10,000 birds, a blogging site for birders around the world. Jamie's interview and others can be found at: <http://10000birds.com/next-month-on-10000-birds-is-parrot-month.htm>*

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The objectives of the World Parrot Trust are to promote the survival of all parrot species in the wild and to advocate for the welfare of individual birds in our homes.

We pursue these goals through efforts in conservation, research, and education and believe that by improving our understanding of wild and captive parrots, we are better prepared to develop and implement solutions for their well-being and survival.

With thousands of members in over 50 countries, the World Parrot Trust works to aid the preservation of wild parrots and enhance the well-being of pet parrots everywhere.

For more information please go to <http://www.parrots.org/>