

## Part 2: 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]

On legislation does CITES work, if not how could it be improved or what could improve on it?

[Dr. Gilardi]

For parrots, CITES absolutely does not work; even their chief scientist admitted that fact recently! CITES has had 35 years to prove itself, and it has been an abject failure in the management of traded parrots. Dozens of species have had to be added to their Appendix I after their “sustainable trade” has driven these species closer to the brink of extinction.

Most people think, understandably, that CITES was set up to restrict trade of endangered species, but in truth, the Convention is really designed to ensure that trade can continue under the banner of “sustainable development.” Given that CITES deals mostly with developed countries buying wildlife from developing countries, for parrots anyway, one could reasonably argue that CITES is little other than a feel good exercise which perpetuates and legitimizes the ability of consumers in rich countries to exploit the wildlife of poor countries.

One simple structural change would take care of this problem in nearly all cases. If CITES were to become a “positive list,” meaning that anyone wishing to harvest and trade species X would have to first demonstrate that such a harvest would be truly sustainable. Even setting that bar at a very low level would eliminate nearly all wildlife trade in the world and ensure that any active trade would stand a good chance of achieving sustainability in practice.

[Charlie Moores]

Am I correct in saying that trafficking rare birds is a win-win situation for the people involved because the fines or sentences imposed are so small in relation to what the traffickers can earn? If that's correct what punishment do traffickers deserve?

[Dr. Gilardi]

If you're suggesting that existing enforcement often fails to discourage poaching and trade, then yes, you are quite correct. I don't think it's as simple as increasing fines or prison sentences, although both can of course have a powerful deterrent impact on trade. Combining enforcement with programs which provide trappers with viable alternatives to catching wild birds is ideal. Because they generally make so little money from the birds, this is often easier than it sounds.

[Charlie Moores]

Given all that you know about parrots are you surprised to see so many of them endangered or not surprised at all?

[Dr. Gilardi]

Given what I know about people, I'm not surprised that so many species are threatened. If we could only leave them alone! Humans have a seemingly insatiable need to 'own' things they value, and that hasn't served parrots well over the millennia. But human love of parrots is deep and universal, and it's been around since prehistoric times. So we shouldn't expect it to end, ever.

However, the massive international trade, both legal and illegal, can be largely stopped with concerted effort. And the good news is that these two are often correlated, so if you stop the legal trade, you cut back the illegal trade as well. Once you take the money out of the picture (legal exports to the developed world primarily), most of the incentive to trap and collect parrot chicks tends to disappear. Coupled with the ease of captive breeding, these changes lead to decreased demand, even in developing countries where parrot keeping has been a tradition forever.

Things are turning around, and luckily, this same affinity for parrots also means that some of these same people are enthusiastic supporters of parrot conservation and welfare, that's why we exist and that's the only reason we've been able to work all these years to save parrots, both captive and wild.



Papuan Lory feeding in the wild. © Ron Hoff.

[Charlie Moores]

You sound quite optimistic. Is that how you feel, or do you actually wake up some nights wondering just when the tide will turn in favour of wildlife in general and parrots specifically?

[Dr. Gilardi]

I'm generally optimistic and feel like most threatened parrots will likely show positive trends in the coming years. We've produced enough success stories in our 20 years at the Trust to feel confident and generally optimistic. Getting the EU to stop importing wild birds just this last year was a huge comfort for us all, reassuring us that, in the face of solid information, governments really can make good and effective choices. That ban alone has now spared some 12 million wild birds – mostly spectacular parrots and passerines from the tropics. Indonesia, Mexico, and other range states have made great progress in recent years as well, and all of this points to encouraging and positive trends in protection for wild parrots around the world.

Eliminating the threat from trade only makes our job saving rare species that much easier and more successful, and of course it keeps millions of wild birds out of cages. So in the end, all these activities dovetail nicely.

[Charlie Moores]

You must be expecting to see some species go extinct, though, given how low the numbers of some of them are? Which do you think might be next?

[Dr. Gilardi]

The next one to go? Probably not the famously threatened ones like Kakapo or Spix's Macaw. It'll likely be another *Chamosyna* lorikeet in the south Pacific or something equally obscure. Naturally, we'll be working hard to make sure it never happens again!



Kakapo parrot.  
© Brent Barrett

[Charlie Moores]

You said that your optimism is based on the successes the Trust has already had. I'm sure it's invidious to ask you to highlight one or two above the others, but if you had to name them which do you feel has been your most important successes so far?

[Dr. Gilardi]

We have had quite a few, yes, but if I had to choose one field conservation success, it would have to be the recovery of the [Echo Parakeet in Mauritius](#) – a bird that was down to a dozen or so individuals in the entire world, it was the project the Trust first selected for support in 1989. The echo is just recently off the critical list and now numbers in the hundreds.



Echo Parakeet male and female, Mauritius.  
© World Parrot Trust.

Thinking more broadly, as I said earlier the [Trust's trade campaign](#) in the EU which came to fruition in 2007 will surely be our longest lasting success (so far!). For us, it was a great lesson in how a small organization can help form a powerful coalition of hundreds of like-minded groups, and use science to inform and change policy. That act alone eliminated > 90% of the legal trade in wild birds around the world, sparing millions of birds every year.

[Charlie Moores]

That really was a fantastic piece of news. Did the chance of importing the H5N1 virus in wild birds sway opponents of a ban, and if the threat of H5N1 (which is really a disease of the poultry trade) is ever removed, is there a possibility that traders et al might attempt to have the ban lifted again?

[Dr. Gilardi]

Great questions, both! It wasn't that the threat of H5N1 swayed opponents so much as it got the attention of the health ministers and gave our concerns about bird trade (biosecurity, conservation, and welfare) a place at the table. Our sense all along was that if we could just get the right doors open, the EU would make the right decision in its own economic self-interest. Put another way, the risks to agriculture and human health are measured in billions, the potential economic gains from importing birds are measured in millions – so very roughly a thousand fold difference!

Once the appropriate health agency in Brussels was willing to look at the questions we were raising and commission a scientific study, we had a strong sense that they would have a basis for a ban. It could have come out differently of course, bad science, bad policy, but in the end, the study was amazingly thorough and the ban is a very strong one.

While you are technically correct about H5N1 being primarily a disease of poultry, it can and does infect many other species, sometimes much more dangerously. One reason is that non-poultry birds can carry and shed the virus without showing symptoms, and the other is that many exotic birds in trade are in VERY close contact with humans.

There is little doubt that people involved in the bird trade will try to get the ban overturned, and there have been legal attempts to do so already. Of course many of us in conservation and welfare would have liked to see a ban passed with stronger language about these issues as well. But because the scientific report is so substantial with regard to the biosecurity and welfare risks created by importing wild birds, to convince the EU that this analysis is somehow incorrect, or that we should once again take known risks – all so a handful of people can make a handful of money – just seems very unlikely. More likely I think is that bird enthusiasts in Europe will become more skilled at maintaining, breeding, and trading captive bred birds, and it's quite possible that their profits will actually go up in the long run.

[Charlie Moores]

What projects are you working on now that you'd like our readers to know about/support?

[Dr. Gilardi]

At any given time, we're working on a number of field projects aiming to save endangered parrots, right now [Blue-throated Macaws](#) in Bolivia and [Thick-billed Parrots](#) in Mexico are two very active projects which need support. We're also working on trade in many parts of the world, focusing on [African Grey Parrots](#) in Cameroon, and cockatoos and lorikeets in Indonesia for example.

The easiest way for readers to learn about our work and to support parrot conservation is to visit us at [Parrots.org](#), subscribe to our free e-newsletter [Flock Talk](#), join us and become a [World Parrot Trust member](#), and maybe purchase a copy of [PollyVision](#). All of these are easy and fun ways to get up to speed on the plight of parrots and to help save them at the same time.



African Grey Parrot. © Jamie Gilardi.



Blue-throated Macaw adult and offspring in wild nest, Bolivia. © Toa Kyle.

[Charlie Moores]

Which presumably is why our readers should join your organisation..?

[Dr. Gilardi]

At the Trust, we're light on staff, and quick to take action wherever it's needed. So members have a very direct and substantial role in our work saving parrots, and they know that their support is being efficiently and effectively directed. They also get a fantastic advert-free magazine and full access to the most [comprehensive parrot site on the web](#). Online they can research and learn about parrots with our online encyclopedia, reference library and extensive image gallery. They can also participate in discussions via forums, bloggers and online experts and download a large collection of resources.

My sense is that people are inspired to join and support organizations which are getting meaningful work done, to feel that they're part of something bigger, and to feel that their actions are making a difference in the world. Our members have enjoyed these benefits for 20 years now, and we look forward to carrying on this tradition for the next 20, and beyond.

[Charlie Moores]

You guys at the WPT obviously work very hard. Would you recommend a life as a full-time conservationist?

[Dr. Gilardi]

Naturally, it's all dependent on the individual, and I'm not sure there is a whole lot of choice involved, as I would guess most people either lean this way or not, regardless of whether they get paid for it. Achieving measurable success in conservation is always hard and there is a lot of interest for very few real jobs.

[Charlie Moores]

Does your role require you to be more of a diplomat or politician than you expected or were you under no illusions from the outset? Do any examples where you've really had to use either of those skills stand out in your memory?

[Dr. Gilardi]

I suppose I had envisioned myself mostly doing field biology and conservation rather than running an organization, and in that sense, yes of course it's important to be diplomatic. At the Trust, I've been lucky enough to work for an organization which knows exactly where it stands on all the crucial issues, so we can be very clear and honest about our principles and our language.

It's funny, when we got deeply involved in the EU trade campaign, I fully expected that the big diplomatic challenges would arise when dealing with the importers in Europe. They were actually quite straightforward and in fact fun to negotiate with, presumably because we were all coming from clear and honest positions. Amazingly enough, the moments which really tested our patience and diplomatic skills were our dealings with other conservation NGOs which had more 'complicated' views on the bird trade and whether it should be ended.

[Charlie Moores]

I'd love to delve deeper into that last statement Jamie – but I suspect the diplomat in you would rather I didn't! Instead I'll just ask if you personally could only see one more parrot species in the wild which would it be and why?

[Dr. Gilardi]

As I'm most fascinated mostly by behaviour and physiology, nearly any parrot will do, even captive birds, they just have to be doing something interesting. Earlier this year, I saw some *Pyrrhura* in Guyana chewing on and rubbing themselves on lichen after a rain shower – it was ritualized and clearly there was

something mysterious going on there ([view video clip](#)). For sheer wonder, I'd love to one day see any of the minuscule "pygmy parrots" from the south Pacific or to see Palm Cockatoos in courtship.

[Charlie Moores]

Finally, is there a question you've never been asked that you wished you had been, or is there a question you wish I'd asked but didn't?

[Dr. Gilardi]

Yes, but it's usually presented as a rhetorical question without an expected answer; usually something like, "...is there really any point, what with human population growth, global warming, rapid deforestation, why bother trying to save anything?" Naturally, we can't ignore these very important issues, but there is so much we can do now which will make a difference both now and in the future. We easily lose sight of how fast things change, both in a bad way and a good way. One of my grandfathers built massive dams and the other ran rubber plantations in Indonesia – they lived in a world with seemingly limitless resources. Today, we're having conversations and taking actions that they never would have dreamed of – in some cases tearing down those same dams to save threatened salmon and replanting plantations with native forests.

When I started graduate school in the late 80's, the USA was still importing hundreds of thousands of wild parrots annually, and now we have banned that practice as has the EU. Things do change for the positive, and they do so because people who care work hard to change them. This stuff is all well worth doing, I'm proud to have the opportunity to be pushing in the right direction, and we can use all the help we can get.

[Charlie Moores]

Thank you so much for your time and the care you've evidently taken with this interview – it's much appreciated!

[Dr. Gilardi]

I really appreciate your interest and your great questions, so thank you!

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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/>