

PsittaScene



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Feather Picking Frustration

February 2008



One...

A 2nd Chance

for confiscated greys



Two...



Free!

The illegal trade in wildlife is a difficult problem in many areas of the world often involving large sums of money and corruption at many levels. Naturally, African Grey parrots in Cameroon and throughout equatorial Africa are a special focus of this trade, and we have worked actively there to fund guards at known trapping areas and have remained in touch with contacts throughout the region to keep abreast of developments. Recently we were tipped off about possible illegal exports of African Greys from Cameroon, but it was only with the help of local wildlife enforcement organisation the Last Great Ape Organization (LAGA) that the authorities acted. LAGA was able to get a government minister interested in publicising the smuggling attempt and to make an example of the two men responsible.

While celebrating the rare smuggling convictions, our attention turned immediately to the birds - over a thousand wild African Greys seized just as they were being smuggled out of the country. To aid in their recovery and release, we supplied emergency funding in the first days of the crisis and swiftly implemented an online appeal on our website to tell the story and raise funds for relief. As the situation progressed, we sent veterinary assistance and critical medical supplies to help these birds - the victims of illegal trade in a favourite species of parrot lovers the world over.

After being illegally trapped and nearly exported from Cameroon on forged paperwork, over 700 of 1,220 African Grey Parrots were released and given a 2nd chance at freedom.

Their Story...

...comes from Limbe Wildlife Centre in Cameroon where this recent unplanned diversion into parrots pulled attention from their usual charges - endangered primates seized from the bush-meat and pet trades.



L to R: Crates filled with illegally caught African Grey Parrots are seized on the tarmac in Cameroon; visiting Italian veterinarians assist Limbe Wildlife Centre staff to pluck damaged birds.

From Dr. Felix Lankester, Project Manager, Limbe Wildlife Centre

On 24th November we received a call that approximately 500 African Grey parrots had been seized by the Ministry of Forests and Wildlife in Douala International Airport. The parrots were being illegally shipped to Bahrain to enter the exotic pet trade. We were asked to take the parrots as there was nowhere else for them to go.

We do receive African Greys from time to time but usually in pairs, never in groups of 500 birds! It was pandemonium when they all arrived, squashed into tiny crates, the live birds standing on top of their dead cage mates. It was a terrible scene.

However, this was nothing compared to what was just around the corner, for on the 5th of December we received another call - a 2nd illegal shipment of birds was seized at the same airport. A truck arrived the same day loaded with its sickening cargo of dying parrots. The second shipment contained 727 birds - in less than 2 weeks we had received 1,220 birds. Coping with these unusual circumstances so quickly is a testament to our staff, who went from keeping apes to keeping birds overnight.

We had to move quickly to accommodate the birds and begin building new flight cages. Right away, 681 parrots were released in nearby forested sites. Another 59 were selected for release six weeks later. They, like most of the remaining birds, had put on considerable weight by then and were looking much stronger and healthier. Still, the remaining 300 or so birds were unreleasable at that time, having damaged or glued feathers (they were trapped using glue

on the branches of fruiting trees) or being too sick for release. These birds began a long-term course of rehabilitation and treatment.

This is a tragic story of wildlife being exploited for the international trade in exotic pets, one of the most lucrative illegal trades in the world. However, due to some diligent work by those responsible for implementing the wildlife laws of Cameroon, at least these birds have been saved. Their case has drawn international media attention and uncovered corruption at a very high level. The focus on the parrot trade allowed LAGA to uncover how white-collar criminals thrive on complicity to gain a legitimate cover and eliminate the risk factor, and, perhaps most importantly, it has persuaded the national government to take action against those in charge.

How many other shipments of birds make their way out of the country undetected we can only dread to imagine. The story of these parrots, and that of so many other animals, signal how the forests of Cameroon are being plundered by the unsustainable trade in wild animals. This can not continue.

I would like to thank all those who have rallied behind us at Limbe Wildlife Centre in our hour of need to provide emergency funding, equipment and assistance: they are the World Parrot Trust, the Born Free Foundation, the Born Free Foundation - USA, the Humane Society, and all the individuals who have donated funds.



Cameroon; terrible conditions in crowded boxes; flight cages built to house hundreds of birds that could not be immediately plucked for feathers in order to speed recovery before release.

From Dr. Gino Conzo, DVM, Napoli, Italy

At the beginning of December the World Parrot Trust informed me about a very large seizure of African Grey parrots and put me in touch with Dr. Felix Lankester at Limbe Wildlife Centre to provide emergency advice.

As the weeks went by and all the releasable birds were freed, it became clear that the remaining birds needed their damaged feathers removed. This long and tedious procedure was urgently required to speed the growth of new feathers and allow the birds to be released much more quickly. When the Trust asked me if I would be willing to travel to Limbe to assist, I gladly accepted. On January 16, I travelled to Cameroon with Mario D'Angelo, an Italian volunteer. Our bags were packed with antibiotics, latex gloves, syringes, suture thread, and a large supply of vitamin supplements donated by Gea International. A supply of hard to obtain injectable Doxycycline had been procured by the Trust in Switzerland and shipped by DHL to Limbe.

We understood right away, as the hot and humid weather greeted us at our arrival in Douala, that our task would not be simple. This is the dry season in Cameroon, with temperatures averaging 85°F (30°C) with high humidity. Still, despite the discomfort, our first morning showed us a rich and seemingly intact nature.

We received a warm welcome from Felix and all the staff at the LWC, and started to work immediately in an area that had been set up for us close to the two aviaries where the parrots are kept.

It turned out that most of the flight feathers

of all the birds were either cut or broken, or covered with the glue used to trap them, but the birds were otherwise in good nutritional condition. One by one we caught and anaesthetized each parrot with Isoflurane, removed damaged feathers with surgical tweezers, and medicated the follicles to prevent infection. This was how we proceeded, bird after bird, all day for over five days. I was very grateful for Mario's help as the heat, the humidity and the insects didn't allow me to proceed as quickly as I would have liked to. At some point we started taking turns plucking the birds, so that we could each rest for a while or take care of something else.

As each bird was anaesthetized, it received a general health check. About twelve birds had open wounds on their chests that appeared to be old and caused by hard falls. They were medicated and placed in smaller cages. Some will probably need surgery to reduce the size of the wound and speed their recovery. Four birds had string tied to a leg or a ring, as they were likely used as trapping lures.

Our work day started at 8 am and continued with no breaks until 5 pm. We made sure to leave the birds alone when there were still a couple of hours of daylight before sunset, so that they could eat, as they wouldn't touch any food in our presence. Their diet consists of fruits, African palm nuts, and a mash made with corn and cassava flour, to which we advised the addition of cooked beans. The mash is medicated with 1% Doxycycline - to treat the Chlamydia that was previously diagnosed and to prevent infection in the feather follicles - and

Phytotherapeutic supplements containing vitamins, amino acids, and minerals to help stimulate the growth of the new feathers.

We were also able to provide other advice to give these parrots the best chance of successful recovery and eventual release. We advised modifications to the aviaries such as soft bedding like straw or other materials to reduce the traumatic effects of falls since many of the parrots are unable to fly. We also suggested they substitute the metal food and water containers with others made with safer materials, to lower the height of the perches, and to shield the aviaries with palm leaves or other materials to create a visual barrier between the birds and the visitors and reduce their stress.

The Limbe staff were also trained on the best ways to handle the parrots, on how to medicate them and on how to perform small medical procedures.

All in all it was a great experience, not easy but very rewarding. We were able to treat all of the birds and we are looking forward to the day when they will be set free.

To learn more or to contribute to this effort email uk@worldparrottrust.org or visit www.parrots.org and click this link:

