Magazine of the World Parrot Trust

PsittaScene

In this Issue

700+ Greys Set Free
Feather Picking Frustration

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Psitta Scene

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contents

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fromthedirector

One of the most exciting things about the Trust - and by extension my job as director - is that we're constantly looking towards new horizons, tackling new challenges, and learning new things about the world of parrots.

As we move beyond the EU trade campaign, we're now turning our attention to new fronts. We are immersed in a promising bird trade project in Cameroon (see page 3) and I spent the last part of 2007 exploring bird markets in east Asia. It turns out that much of the Asian bird trade is generated by a curious and longstanding tradition - that of releasing birds in religious rituals. These practices now lead to the harvest and release of many millions of wild birds across Asia each year. Naturally, this also results in the deaths of millions more not to mention causing serious conservation and disease risks as well. Sorting out the relationships between these trade niches while creating viable solutions should challenge us and our partners for the foreseeable future.

With each new development in the parrot world we find our conservation plate continues to overflow. Recently we found that a bird so familiar to us all - the Sun Conure - turns out to be among the rarest of all parrots in the wild. On the border of Guyana and Brazil, this stunning parrot is just the latest casualty of a "legal" trade that has reduced their numbers to possibly only hundreds in the wild. Hopefully there is still time to save the wild birds. Please stay tuned as we begin work on this effort in the coming year.

2007 was an exceptional year for the Trust. I want to extend a special thank you to all of our members and supporters for making our work possible. 2008 holds new and exciting promise for the parrots of the world, and I hope you too will enjoy learning all about it in the twentieth (!) volume of the *PsittaScene*.

Jamie Gilardi
Director

onourcovers

FRONT In their last step before complete freedom, hundreds of confiscated grey parrots are released from cramped travel boxes into a "halfway house" aviary in Cameroon, west Africa. Although many were discovered to be in poor physical condition, over 700 were sufficiently fit for quick and successful release. © Limbe Wildlife Centre

BACK The Austral Conure (*Enicognathus ferrugineus*), like many parrots, has barely been studied in the wild. Basic field research (see Cachañas page 11) supplies key information that can be used to track their status over time. © Tom Rogers

A 2nd Chance
for confiscated greys

Photos © Courtesy of Limbe Wildlife Centre

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 released; visiting Italian veterinarians assist Limbe Wildlife Centre staff to pluck damaged

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
d 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 Isofluorane, removed damaged feathers with surgical tweezers, and medicated the follicles to prevent infection. This was how we preceded, 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 Chlamydiosis that was previously diagnosed and to prevent infection in the feather follicles - and Phytotherapic 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:

On Life in Africa :

interview with a parrot researcher

Photo: © Caitlin Lepper

Steve Boyes, a wilderness guide and PhD Zoology student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, answers some questions about his experiences studying the Meyer's Parrot. Steve is currently working with the World Parrot Trust on a lobby to get the wild-caught bird trade banned in South Africa and writing up his PhD Zoology in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. These are some insights from running the Meyer's Parrot Project in the Okavango Delta…

How did you first get involved in African Parrot Research?

Since childhood I have been interested in African birdlife and my parents made sure that whenever possible we were in the wilderness areas of South Africa and Namibia learning and absorbing as much as possible. As a young birding enthusiast one of the easiest calls to identify is the contact call of a *Poicephalus* parrot, for me the Meyer's and Brown-headed Parrots (*P. cryptoxanthus*) in the Kruger National Park, South Africa. I remember reacting to this high-pitched contact call every time I heard it, repeatedly notifying those around me that a parrot had flown over - a habit I found very useful 20 years later. So, the inclination to study the Meyer's Parrot was always there. I had been living in the Okavango Delta for 18 months already, working for Wilderness Safaris as a camp manager and guide, when Professor Perrin at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, having learnt that I was hiding in the Okavango, approached me with the offer of a PhD Zoology on the Meyer's Parrot. Obviously, I jumped at the opportunity and my involvement in African parrot conservation and research has grown ever since.

A group of Meyer's Parrots socialising in the morning before going off to feed.

Insights and Photos by Steve Boyes

Why are you and your team so excited about working with the Meyer's Parrot?

Meyer's Parrots (*Poicephalus meyeri*) have the widest distributional range of any of the African parrots, extending the length of Africa from South Africa all the way up to the southern Sudan. It is by far and away the most abundant parrot in Africa, best suited to the current climatic conditions and the predominance of savanna bushveld in southern and eastern Africa. Basically, given the current habitat conditions in Africa the Meyer's Parrot is a niche specialist that got it right! This is the most important parrot in Africa and understanding the ecological mechanisms that support its success across the continent is fundamental to the development of a conservation plan for all African parrots. The Meyer's Parrot could provide insight into the limited distribution and questionable status of other *Poicephalus* parrots, such as the Cape Parrot (*P. robustus*), Niam-Niam Parrot (*P. crassus*), Yellow-faced Parrot (*P. flavifrons*), Ruppell's Parrot (*P. ruppellii*), and Jardine's Parrot (*P. gulielmi*). Due to their recent speciation, any research done on the Meyer's can likely be used to develop conservation tools, such as nest boxes, for other *Poicephalus* parrots.

Beyond all of this the Meyer's Parrot is a fascinating, intelligent and interactive bird that will always keep you guessing and amazed. Your first quiet experience in a tree as a female carefully considers you and then accepts that you probably pose no danger is truly spiritual. In those eyes and in that silence you realize that she is self aware and complex of character. She is truly weighing you up. After years on the project individually identifying the breeding pairs (using unique crown markings) we also began to see distinct characters in the individual parrots - brave, nervous, careless, aggressive, etc. The reality of getting to know any species intimately is truly exciting and stimulating.

What other kinds of work are you involved in?

I am currently working with the World Parrot Trust to halt the import of wild-caught birds into South Africa, specifically the African Grey (*Psittacus erithacus*) and Senegal Parrot (*Poicephalus senegalus*). We are in the process of networking with conservation NGO's, breeders and importers in order to avoid unnecessary backlash after we make our pitch to the government. For more information on this effort please contact me on boyes@worldparrottrust.org

Otherwise, I am in the process of inaugurating the Okavango Cavity Nesting Project with the Botswana Department of Wildlife & National Parks and University of Botswana, looking at the breeding biology of all cavity nesting bird, mammal and reptile species in the Okavango Delta.

A pair of Meyer's Parrots launches into the morning sky from a favoured nest tree.

Tell us one really memorable story from your years with the project?

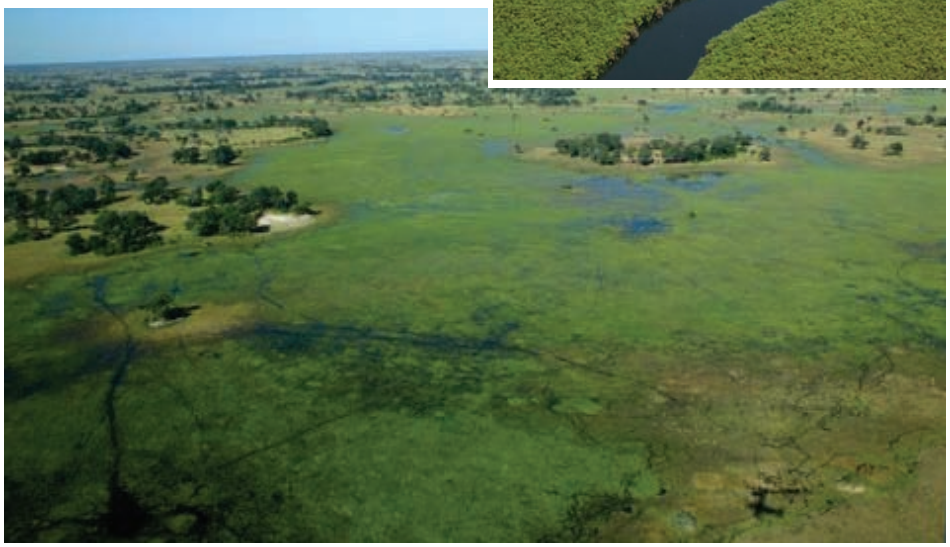
There is one particularly heart-breaking story. The pair (above) was the love story of the research project, as I had been tracking their breeding activity for three seasons. In 2004, I individually-identified these parrots using their distinctive yellow crown markings. That first season they fledged two chicks, probably losing one due to the poor rains and resultant lack of suitable insect protein for rapid chick growth that year. In 2005, they nested again, but this time due to an unknown predation event they lost their chicks after hatching. In 2006, I missed them as I was working on the project from the University of California, Berkeley. When I arrived in 2007 I was very interested to see whether they were still together and using the same nest cavity. They were, and thus became the

stars of the 2007 field season. We were expecting hatching to take place, so were visiting most of our nest cavities daily. One morning, I got a call from one of the volunteers, telling me that something was terribly wrong at this nest cavity. The male was screaming wildly at the entrance of the nest hole, but not going in. He was then joined by two other parrots, who added to the chaos. They were so excited that at times they seemed to be fighting with each other. Then after two hours of observation a genet (right) stuck its head out the hole, thus confirming that the female and eggs had been destroyed. Upon inspecting the nest a week later, we found that she had been killed along with one hatchling and two unhatched eggs. It was devastating to watch the male calling and calling in the tree. He stayed there for three days, calling late into the night. We even saw him flying around in the moonlight in distress. This parrot was truly self aware and did love his partner - this was more than pair-bonding, they were a partnership for life.

What are some of the recent accomplishments in the Meyer's Parrot Project?

In January 2007 we set up our first independent research camp. The camp allows us to accommodate volunteers and dedicate every waking moment to parrot research and conservation through awareness programs, lectures to tourists, and the involvement of professional guides in the Okavango Delta. The 2007 field season was made possible by funding from the British Ecological Society and several private donors, most notably Julie Drier, in the United States. On 5th February the camp was christened "Vundumtiki Parrot Camp". "Vundumtiki" means "one small fish" - a phrase taken from a Bayei folklore story of the island. Vundumtiki Island is located on the junction of the Maunachira and Kiankiandavu Channels in the north-eastern Okavango Delta, Botswana. This is one of the remotest locations in the Okavango Delta system. It is 3 hours from the closest airstrip and 15 to 48 hours away from Maun, the closest town (300 km or 185 miles away) - a true wilderness area. For our intensive research program during the primary parrot breeding season between January and July 2007 we had two to four volunteers in camp at any one time. All had diverse and life-changing experiences.

"Vundumtiki Parrot Camp" is the homebase for the Meyer's Parrot Project. Vundumtiki Island is near the Maunachira Channel (right) in the Okavango Delta system (below).



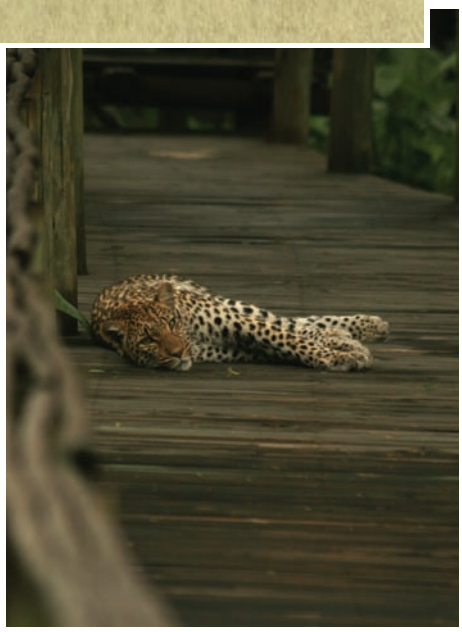
What do volunteers to the project do?

Basically a volunteer becomes part of the team and is involved in all aspects of the project and camp life (including washing, collecting fire wood, cooking, etc.). For the 2007 field season our focus was the primary nesting season. Volunteers did 5 hour shifts monitoring active nest cavities, walking transects in the bush with a guide certified to walk in the "Big-5" area with guests, and preparing and cleaning research equipment. Volunteers joined the project for at least a month, and all expenses in camp were covered. All the volunteer needed to do was get to Maun and we would fly them out. The volunteers were mostly young students interested in ecology, coming from as far afield as the University of Arizona, USA.

Life in the Okavango Wilderness is unpredictable and consequences when something goes wrong are absolute. We have to be extremely cautious in the way we do things. Nevertheless, most volunteers had diverse and life-changing experiences while working on the project. Among their stories were being charged by elephants, having lions kill a buffalo at a 10-hour nest observation site, sharing a shower with the local leopard, and warding off invasion by troops of baboons on the island. Thankfully, no one got hurt, only the local hyena when some shelves collapsed on him (actually I think the shelves were worse off than him).

Thank you to all of you that worked so hard in setting up the camp, so patiently in the 10-hour observations, and so bravely on the bush walks, all in the name of parrot research and conservation. For me their involvement in the project was two-fold, whereby I wanted them to learn and form a personal relationship with the parrots while also appreciating the sense of place in a wilderness area away from all outside influence.

In this part of Africa the safest place to stare through the spotting scope doing nest observation is from the roof of the LandRover.



Project volunteers have exciting and unpredictable experiences while immersed in the project and the surroundings. This very relaxed leopard lounging on the deck outside the shower definitely spices up the bathing experience.

What were your major results?

Based on observations made between 2004 and 2007 it became clear that avoiding inter-specific competition by choosing specific seasonal food item and breeding strategies was central to answering a fundamental question put forward at the onset of the project: What factors enable *P. meyeri* to be so "successful" in its natural habitat? During the first two years of the Meyer's Parrot Project we focussed on their feeding ecology, habitat preferences and general behaviour (e.g. breeding seasons, preening, allo-preening, roosting, etc.) for correlation with rainfall seasonality, resource abundance, and the annual flood regime in the study area. In 2006, I did data analysis at the University of California, Berkeley, in Prof. Steve Beissinger's Lab, raised funds and did project design for the 2007 field season. The time in Berkeley revolutionised the way I look at ecological research and made my return to Vundumtiki a necessity.

Major findings of the three years in the field include:

- Meyer's parrots track resources based on abundance and avoiding competition with other frugivorous birds and primates. They vocalize when they find suitable food trees and target seeds from unripe fruits and leguminous posts that are inaccessible to other seed predators;

- They can open the extremely hard nut cases of the Marula (*Scherolcarya birrea*), Real Fan Palm (*Hyphaene petersiana*), and Baobab (*Adansonia digitata*) fruits, thus gaining exclusive access to the protein rich seeds. This behaviour has not been observed in other birds in the Okavango Delta or *Poicephalus* parrots elsewhere in Africa;

- Breeding was observed throughout the year, however, 95% of the breeding activity fell within the period March - July (i.e. the winter months). This seemed to be synchronous with the end of the wet season, the onset of the flood, the cessation of breeding activity in the Burchell's Starling (*Lamprotornis australis*) (thus avoiding competition with this large, aggressive cavity nesting bird species) and a peak in the infestation levels of parasitic larvae in the Marula fruit (*Sclerocarya birrea*), Terminalia sericea pods, Bushwillow pods (*Combretum hereronse*) and Mopane pods (*Colophospermum mopane*) - a food source they eat almost exclusively

Please contact me on boyes@africaskyblue.org in order to obtain information on future peer-reviewed publications coming out later this year.

What are your hopes for the future of the project?

Currently I am busy with my PhD Zoology write-up here at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, after which I would like to return to the Okavango Delta to continue my work on the Meyer's Parrot with the Research Centre for African Parrot Conservation till the end of the year. We have three-year research and residence permits from the Office of the President in Botswana and concession from Wilderness Safaris Botswana for the same period to use Vundumtiki Island. We had limited success in the 105 nest boxes we put up around the study site in 2007. We used 6 different nest box designs, but did not achieve successful breeding in the nest boxes. We hope to test variations on the most successful design from the 2007 breeding season in order to develop a nest box design that can be used in other areas where, due to clear-felling, suitable nest cavities do not exist.

As is the case with any project of this nature, questions are self-sustaining as discoveries either undermine current assumptions or open up new possibilities for investigation. I am currently training Zenzele Mpofu from the Department of Wildlife & National Parks to take over the project from me when I am finished at the end of the year, so that we establish a long-term research station and possibly expand our scope to include other bird species. I would like to apply what I have learnt studying the Meyer's Parrot to other African parrot species, thus testing the assumptions about them resulting from this study. It is also my dream and focus to be able to, by 2010, motivate a nine month "African Parrot Expedition" visiting all identified source areas for all African parrot metapopulations, and spending time assessing their breeding behaviour, status and conservation biology (especially any instances of human-parrot conflict and trade), while photographing, ringing and taking blood from all species and subspecies in order to once and for all complete the story of African parrot evolution and biogeography. I would appreciate any correspondence in regard to possible collaboration or support for this initiative.

As is always the case we are dependent on research funding from funding agencies and charitable donations from private donors. To this end I would like to invite charitable donations to the project through the World Parrot Trust. Feel free to contact me for more information…

◀ Bushwillow grubs are the Meyer's most significant dietary component during the breeding season. The high protein diet stops two weeks before fledging, after which the chicks are vegetarian.

While there was interest, we haven't had breeding success in the nest boxes yet. We hope the boxes will be used in coming seasons, resulting in easier access to growing nestlings.

Do you have any last words for readers?

Antoine de Saint Exupery said: "Many have forgotten this truth, but you must not forget it. You remain responsible, forever, for what you have tamed." Let's stop the wild-caught bird trade, as we already have more than we can be responsible for, as can be seen in the emergence of organizations such as the Gabriel Foundation in Denver dedicated to taking care of abandoned companion parrots. Modern aviculture is now developed enough to supply the needs of international bird trade, thus supplying the basic human curiosity in all things beautiful and natural, our desire for unconditional companionship, and the peace we feel in the presence of an animal. A complete ban in the wild-caught bird trade is not only an economic and conservation requirement, but also an ethical necessity.

Photo: © Ferran Juarez Pluvins

Cachañas

The Austral Conure of Patagonia

By Soledad Díaz & Valeria Ojeda

We wake early to the smell of wet ground. Vegetation surrounds us at our mountain base camp. Our breath shows in the light of our headlamps - made visible by the cold morning air as we prepare our equipment for the day. We split up - one person hiking to a distant Austral Parakeet nest to monitor parental behaviour all day - others visiting the remaining nests to measure adults and chicks.

Hours after our 4am wake-up call, the magical atmosphere changes as the sun starts to appear through the canopy. It is a new day in Patagonia. Between the branches, birds start to wake up. It is a good day to watch parakeets! Not all days are so cooperative. Cold, humidity, late snows and wind can slow or stop our fieldwork for a few hours or days. A sunny day can turn cold in a few hours.

At night, we reunite near the shelter fire, happy but exhausted, talking about details and anecdotes of the day. Night falls and the moon shows itself through the trees. We hear the first night birds - a new journey starts for them. New adventures await when we emerge from our sleeping bags again.

Photo: © Ferran Juarez Pluvins

LEFT Austral Conures are known for being very noisy in flocks. Local people used to say "When Cachañas fly down from the forest to town, a storm is coming." In reality this is true. When a snow storm starts on the high Andes, parrots and other birds seek refuge in town.

LOWER LEFT Conures create a soft nest with little pieces of wood extracted from the nest walls. Clutch size is 6-9 eggs, depending on the nest and the year but one nest was documented with 11 eggs!

LOWER RIGHT Once chicks fledge they spend a lot of time socializing and playing in the branches and on the ground.

Starting in 1998, we began a series of studies on the foraging ecology and reproductive biology of Austral Conures or Parakeets (*Enicognathus ferrugineus*) along with Dr. Ana Trejo from our university. Though it is a common bird in Patagonian forests, very little is known about this species. This lack of information is a big concern because we can´t measure the effects of deforestation and trade without basic knowledge of the species. Most of the references to Austral Conures in the literature consist of anecdotal reports on circumstantial encounters or observations made over short periods. Very little information had been published on foraging or breeding biology by the time we had begun our research.

Photo: © Valeria Ojeda

A mid-size parakeet (28-36 cm, 11-14 in), the Austral Conure is the most southerly distributed psittacids in the world. They are called Cachañas in the native language and are typical of the Andean Patagonian forests of southern Argentina and Chile, from sea level to 2000 meters. They inhabit many different forest types, from Araucaria (*Araucaria araucana*) in its northern reaches to Southern Beech (*Nothofagus spp.*) extending to the southernmost tip of South America.

Outside the breeding season (April-November) this species is highly gregarious. Large flocks explore food sources both inside and outside forests and in adjacent semi-open areas including ranchland and, at times, cultivations and urbanized sites. As breeding season approaches, flocks start to diminish in size, and from December to March, the conures remain in forested habitats, in pairs or small flocks.

Nesting individually in tree cavities the Austral Conure has one brood per season. In the study area, nest initiation is typically very synchronized among pairs, possibly as a result of an even exploitation of the local food resources. Cavity enlargement or preparation starts in October and egg-laying takes place in December. Tree cavities for nesting and roosting can be natural (produced by rot) or excavated by the Magellanic Woodpecker (*Campephilus magellanicus*). Most of the nests we recorded were in live trees that contained noticeable heart rot that allowed enlargement of the cavities by the conures. Nesting cavities were normally reused in consecutive years, and we are suspicious that communal roosting holes are used during the winter, but this needs confirmation.

Photo: © Valeria Ojeda

RIGHT Chicks are weighed and measurements are taken of the tarsus, wing, and head regularly until fledging. Feather development is also carefully tracked. These data helps researchers understand how the wild chicks develop.

LOWER LEFT Newly hatched nestlings are very small and featherless. When trying to take measurements its hard to get over how delicate they seem!

LOWER RIGHT Fieldwork can be fun and interesting but it is not glamorous. While monitoring parental behaviour and breeding biology, researchers spend long hours recording all observations at a nest.

Photo: © Soledad Díaz

Conservation Issues

The Austral Conure is currently included in Appendix II of CITES and is considered of low concern in Chile and Argentina, in both cases with a zero extraction value (trade not allowed). But due in part to the lack of studies on this species, its conservation status is uncertain. The notion that it is "abundant" because large noisy flocks are observed during austral winters around urbanized sites may be misleading, since the actual status of most populations is unknown.

Until now, this species was only known to be affected by habitat loss (forest loss and fragmentation), while the live bird trade was considered of minor impact. However, over the course of our studies we found a growing interest in this species as a pet, both at a local and at a distribution-wide scale.

Photo: © Laura Chazarreta

Causes for concern

Austral Conure are potentially vulnerable during the reproductive season. They require very large trees to accommodate nesting cavities and depend on food sources close to their nesting sites. This leads us to propose that Austral Conures are dependent on rather continuous mature native forests for breeding purposes. As with other regions of the world, forestry operations are rapidly expanding towards the southern temperate forests, with logging projects extending throughout Chile and Argentina at an increased rate.

Moreover, this species is now being persecuted and hunted during winter, when large flocks gather around villages and urbanized sites. We have witnessed people (mostly children) hunting the conures with slings when they perch and forage in small groups of trees. As a result, many birds are injured or killed and others are caught and sold at a very low price (about US $3). Once we were aware of this problem, we contacted the authorities. Surprisingly, we found a total lack of enforcement. This may be an emerging problem that was not part of the agenda of the official wildlife management agencies in the past. Unfortunately, we found that owls and other wildlife faced the same problem in urban areas. In this respect, both supervision of human activities and education programs seem fundamental to stop this negative attitude against wildlife from spreading. We suggest it is time to initiate conservation programs directed at the Austral Conure before they become more popular in the live bird trade culture, which, along with habitat loss, may result in the species becoming endangered within the next 10 years.

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Photo: © Valeria Ojeda

P·E·T Pages

PsittaScene's PET Pages help you provide the very best for your bird by focusing on Parrot behaviour, Enrichment and Training.

Photo: © EB Cravens

This issue's contributor Jim McKendry has spent many years rehabilitating Gang-Gang Cockatoos that have feather chewed. This female was once completely flightless and is now fully feathered.

Jim is one of our online experts and answered this question on "Ask an Expert" on our website. He works full-time teaching science at St. Teresa's Catholic College in Queensland, Australia. He has worked professionally with birds as a presentations keeper at Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary and provides parrot behaviour and enrichment consultation services via his website at www.pbec.com.au.

For more expert answers to parrot questions visit www.parrots.org > Forums, Experts & Bloggers

Feather Picking Frustrations

Q

We have two African Grey parrots. Peaches is three years old and Vincent is 11 months old. Both birds have their own cages and a quiet room to sleep in, away from the family. They have an average of 10-12 hours sleep each night. Their diet is a mixture of pellets, seed, fresh fruit, vegetables, the occasional treat and a supplement of palm nut oil. They are showered once a week and sprayed every other day. Both have free flight time when we are home and are out of their cages with the family for a minimum of 5 hours, but often eight hours or more.

Peaches is healthy, happy and well adjusted. Unfortunately, Vincent started plucking his breast feathers when he was 8 months old. We visited the vet, who advised us it was not medical. We have checked all the common environmental and diet-related causes to no avail. His feathers are starting to grow back but occasionally he appears to pluck these out, usually when I go out! This tells me it's likely to be abandonment stress but how do I overcome this? I have tried to give him treats or toys before I go out, we leave a radio on for both birds who are both in the same room for company but in different cages.

I have also noticed that Vincent appears to be rather possessive and often objects when I hold Peaches or when anyone come close to me. We have tried to discourage this by asking the family to interact with him more. He will go to them but often only for a few minutes before he flies to me. Is this an age thing as he is still a baby?

Please help as we feel so responsible and want Vincent to be as happy and well adjusted as Peaches is.

Jo

A

G'day Jo,

Without a doubt, trying to manage feather picking behaviour is the most challenging of the behavioural issues we encounter in captive parrots. It is very difficult for me to cover all the bases in writing for an issue as potentially complex as feather picking. Not being able to actually see the environment or observe Peaches, will limit my response to generalisations. Nevertheless, I have extensive first hand experience with this particular issue as a consultant and I can certainly cover some food for thought from the insights you have shared. Hopefully that will help you develop some strategies to minimise the feather picking behaviour.

Firstly, you've done the right thing by consulting a veterinarian first. My advice to clients managing any problems involving poor feathering or feather damage in their parrots is

Photo: © Jim McKendry

African Grey Parrots are particularly prone to establishing feather picking behaviours in unenriched environments.

to seek veterinary advice first. All the behavioural intervention in the world won't help a parrot that is physically ill. As you have sought veterinary advice and have been advised that the problem is behavioural, let's focus on the key general areas that you can start considering.

Diet & Foraging

Scientific studies have demonstrated a significant disparity between wild and captive parrots in the time spent actively engaged in foraging and feeding behaviours. Reduced active foraging can be considered a precursor to "boredom" or lack of activity. This activity deficit has been linked to excessive amounts of time spent preening by captive parrots, which of course has been linked to improper care of feathers over time. The more dynamic, variable and creative you can be in presenting food, the longer the parrot will need to spend "foraging." This strategy has been used for decades in the zoo industry to reduce stereotypical behaviours in a range of animal species. The relevance for our companion parrots should be obvious.

Diet management involves more than just withholding favoured foods for training treats. Creative diet management for parrots focuses on a range of goals. Initially, it is beneficial to establish a formulated diet as the daily base for food consumption. Then supplement this with a range of other food types, including fruit, vegetables, seeds, natural foliages and even live foods such as mealworms. The composition ratio of each of these supplements should be considered at a species-specific level. Not only will a diet based on a formulated food provide sound nutrition whilst minimising fat intake, it will also enhance the parrot's motivation to forage for more palatable items such as nuts and seeds.

You have described a good diet for your African Greys. However, we often stop at ensuring all nutritional bases are covered, without taking the next step and considering the "when" and "how" of delivering the food. Ideally, time spent feeding (a behaviour that is incompatible with sitting around picking at feathers) is maximised. This may be particularly important at times when we are not around to provide the alternative stimuli needed to redirect feather picking behaviour.

Diet management therefore extends to catering for food allocation at various times of the day. Most parrot species do not feed for only an hour in the morning and an hour in the afternoon as some articles claim. Feeding durations of up to 8 hours and at all times of the day have been observed in the wild. Therefore we may need to consider catering for the natural tendency to forage outside of an established captive feeding regime. From your description, you may have the ability to feed Peaches and Vincent around those times when you leave the house. By doing this you are introducing a stimulus that is likely to offer a highly motivating alternative to feather picking when you are absent.

In my experience, creative food delivery still has limitations in the remediation of feather picking. Best results for providing alternatives to chewing on feathers are usually derived from the provision of natural foraging "browse". This requires a species-specific understanding of parrots and an appreciation of the huge variability in foraging behaviours and preferences. What works as a foraging motivator for one species, or even one individual, may not work for another. In any case, if the daily food intake is staggered it is important to provide natural foraging opportunities outside of those times. This can reduce boredom, stress and anxiety due to separation, and relieve pressures associated with behavioural feather picking.

Photo: © Arlene Alpar

Great ideas such as delivering food in foraging toys rather than open bowls can reduce boredom and feather picking behaviour.

Photo: © Jim McKendry

Providing natural foraging browse, such as the Allocasuarina cones eagerly taken by this Gang-Gang Cockatoo, offers the most effective redirection for feather chewing behaviour for many species.

Many parrot owners simply don't have access to suitable, natural foraging items. In these cases, we need to reflect on the suitability of the artificial enrichment and toys being provided. A lot of the traditional parrot toys lack functional relevance for the birds they are provided for. Fortunately, more and more toys and products specifically designed as "foraging" items are now available. Parrots engage with them with the goal of procuring hidden food treats. We can now provide these items as an alternative to natural browse. If your parrot lacks interest in the toys and artificial enrichment on offer, it's time for a change. The WPT Store is now stocking some cool toys for pet parrots that are worth a look!

Home Sweet Home!

An enclosure that facilitates "normal" behaviours needs to accompany a dynamic and creative approach to food management. In my experience, most pet parrots are maintained in enclosures far too small, and for too long, to maintain optimum behavioural health. Larger enclosures obviously facilitate the provision of a wider range of materials, substrates, perching and food positioning options. If small enclosures are used it may be beneficial to develop a regular routine of varying furnishings. Care should be taken with sensitive individuals with a history of aversive reactions to changes. For such individuals allow for gradual desensitisation to enrichment items, and even new perches in extreme cases.

Bear in mind that parrot owners can "over provide" enrichment items and inadvertently create a cluttered environment that reduces healthy movement within the enclosure. Providing excessive amounts of artificial enrichment may also result in a lack of interest in such items. A rotation schedule, with a minimum number of artificial enrichment items being provided for no more than a week at a time, may be far more beneficial than a "saturation" approach. This is often particularly relevant for young parrots. When we consider enclosure suitability we also may need to consider the position of the enclosure. Incompatibility stress with other animals in the environment might be a potential contributor to feather problems. This possibility prompts the need for careful observation of any parrot that is housed with or around other birds and animals and is damaging its own feathers with appropriate modifications made if necessary. The ideal, in my opinion, is to provide companion parrots with access to an outdoor aviary. This facilitates enhanced provision of natural browse and exposes the bird to a huge variety of natural stimuli, particularly visual and aural stimuli, that is rarely achieved indoors.

Whilst many of us may not be able to provide natural foraging browse, you can certainly create an artificial environment that offers plenty of stimulation!

Photo: © Arlene Alpar

Bathing Schedules

Skin and feather health may be dependent to varying degrees on humidity and access to bathing opportunities. Owners of companion parrots kept indoors, particularly in air-conditioned environments, may need to reassess the bathing schedule of their bird if behavioural feather picking is diagnosed. I have consulted with a number of feather picking birds that were rarely, if ever, bathed or provided with opportunities to self-bathe. This is very important for keepers of neo-tropical species whose natural range is within areas of high annual rainfall. Proper access to bathing promotes natural preening behaviours and can often be a significant component of successful recovery. In the case of Peaches and Vincent, the bathing schedule you have described should be more than adequate.

A Social Life

It's great to see that we have an environment here with two African Greys and not just one. Companion parrots are often deprived of natural physical interactions with conspecifics (same species). When we consider that mutual preening is an integral part of natural pair bond behaviour for a range of species commonly kept as pets, the lack of access to such interactions can be considered contributory to some cases of excessive preening leading to feather damage. Aside from the physical aspect, balancing social interaction for pet parrots encompasses the behavioural and cognitive side as well. Most parrot species (the Kakapo is one exception) are highly social and often form strong pair bonds. It is extremely unnatural for most parrots to be alone for most of the day, as many pet parrots often are. I firmly believe that many parrots fail to cope with the inconsistencies of the human-parrot bond and as a result we often see behavioural abnormalities arise. Obviously there are exceptions, but there is little arguing that captive parrots that are kept alone and without regular human interactions will benefit from the stimulation of another parrot, preferably of the same species, in their environment. A whole suite of behaviours can be observed between parrots, even in different enclosures, housed in the same environment that would otherwise be absent in a solitary individual. Such stimulation can equate to increased activity and engagement in enrichment items and less time spent

Social compatibility is important in reducing the potential for feather picking. Only one of these Blue & Gold Macaws is a feather picker - Can you identify which one?

damaging feathers. The key to this strategy is achieving compatibility and minimising incompatibility stress.

Jo, you have covered this consideration as well as any companion parrot owner can by having two African Greys in the environment. We're still short of the ideal for avoiding feather picking by not having a truly compatible partnership, but Vincent is still very young. Over time, hopefully the level and quality of interactions between Peaches and Vincent will improve and provide both of them with a stronger diversion from picking in your absence.

Finally, considering your question about whether Vincent flying to you and not staying with other family members or visitors for long durations is "age related behaviour". Whilst a young parrot at 11 months of age will certainly still tend to gravitate towards whomever it has a well-established parental association with, it's perhaps best to consider this behaviour purely from a reinforcement schedule perspective. It's likely that the behaviour of flying back to you is reinforced with more consistency, and better contiguity, than the reinforcement on offer from others wanting to handle him. It's also likely that the interactions Vincent has with you are more positively reinforcing in general and that he has established a stronger association with you as someone who is predictable, and offers rewards on a more consistent schedule than others. Try making your goals more achievable for Vincent by setting up a reinforcement schedule from other people that is more consistent and less variable than is perhaps presently being delivered.

Jo, managing feather picking is an on-going process of reflection, careful evaluation of the functional interaction and relationship between the behaviour and the environment, and a dedicated approach to creating alternatives to feather chewing. If the problem persists then I would recommend seeking out some professional advice and support on-site from a consultant or veterinarian who may be able to work with you on some strategies specific to your environment.

Kind Regards from `Down Under',
Jim McKendry

CREATIVE CONSERVATION

Local art supports clay lick protection

In partnership with Peru Verde, the World Parrot Trust is proud to introduce Arpilleras. These amazing one-of-a-kind fabric artworks support a community in one of the very wildest areas of the Peruvian Amazon. The community in turn protects their local clay licks – an arrangement that benefits parrots and humans alike.

Since 1995, Peru Verde, a Peruvian conservation group, has been developing ecotourism sites at existing macaw clay licks in the Peruvian rainforest. In Sepahua, a small Peruvian town on the Lower Urubamba River, the forest is quite intact, with several spectacular macaw clay licks used by over 1,000 parrots and over 300 macaws during the high season (August through October). After trying to introduce ecotourism to the area, Peru Verde found the area was too remote to be profitable. The mostly indigenous community who owns the area had agreed to protect their clay licks, but without tourism, they needed to find an alternative means of support. With few other employment options in the area, the community agreed that the best option for creating jobs related to conservation was through the art of Arpilleras.

Arpilleras (pronounced "ar-pee-air-ah") are appliquéd fabric wall hangings that were originally produced in the 1970's and 80's in Chile by female political prisoners, being held by the Pinochet regime, as a means to communicate their plight. Today, Arpilleras are created in a number of cooperatives located in the dusty shantytowns of poor and displaced families that ring the capital city of Lima. Most themes represent life in the Andes, but Peru Verde took it one step further in depicting life in the forest area surrounding Sepahua.

Protective values can be sustainable

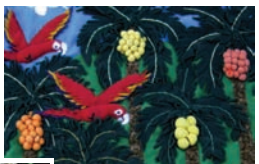
Peru Verde introduced this new art and trained the women of the community in design and production. Today there are over 100 artisans in Sepahua producing Arpilleras. Peru Verde has built a small workshop there where women from neighbouring communities stay during training or when they need to spend time in town. Along with paying the artisans for their efforts, profits from the sale of these colourful Arpilleras pay steady salaries for two guards to protect and monitor two of the largest macaw clay licks in the region: Pucani and Sepahua.

It is a simple and effective arrangement. If the community stops protecting their clay licks, Peru Verde will stop buying crafts from them. But perhaps more important, the local people understand the importance of clay licks to macaw populations. They also appreciate their potential as an ecotourism site that could bring new, sustainable income to Sepahua.

Ornate, creative fabric sculpture

To call these creations "wall hangings" simply doesn't do them justice. The detail and skill in each piece is truly unbelievable. From tiny women weaving on tiny looms, to harvesting fields of tiny cabbages and feeding chickens - the skill and precision required to turn bits of fabric, thread and nature into such a creation is truly remarkable. The added motivation behind their creation makes them all the more valuable to us - parrot lovers half a world away.

Examples of the intricate detail within each one-of-a-kind piece.



You can help

While Peru Verde has mostly focused their effort on selling these Arpilleras to travellers in the region, thanks to the unique partnership with the World Parrot Trust, these pieces can now be offered outside of Peru. Each one is uniquely hand-stitched and includes a hand-written note from the artist. No two are alike. They are affordably priced at £50.00 ($100.00 USD) per design.

Measuring approximately 19.5 x 18.5 inches these stunning Arpilleras are offered in three unique themes, each highlighting a unique and specific aspect of village life:

"The Harvest" (La Cosecha)

shows the Machiguengas, Yine Yame or Ashaninka people working on their farms and harvesting their fruits and tubers. Manioc is one of the staple foods in the rainforest. The Indians also regularly grow bananas, pineapples, peanuts, aguaje palm fruits, and citrus fruits.

"The Weaving Process" (El Tejido)

shows the harvest of the cotton on little family farms along the riverbanks, the spinning of the yarn, the process of dying, and the weaving ladies. Yine Yame Indians paint black and red, geometric designs on the woven clothes. Machiguenga Indians dye their yarns in different earth colours. The designs also include the animals that can be seen in trees near villages and family farms.

"Rainforest" (Collpa)

represents the different animals that live in the rainforest near Sepahua. As the community owns a large macaw clay lick, it appears often in their work. Other rainforest animals featured in Collpa are toucans, parrots, deer, tapirs, butterflies, monkeys and fish (see p18).

For more information or to order online, please go to www.parrots.org/arpilleras, call +44 (0)1736 751026 or email admin@worldparrottrust.org.

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Parrots in the Wild