



Twenty Years

www.psittascene.org

Saving Parrots

February 2009



# Psitta Scene

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Printed by Martin Luck Print, Helston  
[www.martinluck.co.uk](http://www.martinluck.co.uk)

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## from the director

Once we conceived of a cover-of-covers to launch our 20th Anniversary year of the World Parrot Trust, we had the pleasure of thumbing through heaps of issues, stories and images. Two things jumped out at me as most striking, the first being how far we'd come since the first 12 page black and white *PsittaScene* issue in 1989, almost 80 issues ago.

But in reading those early articles, I was more powerfully struck by just how consistent our mission has been for two decades; we started with a firm focus on the conservation and welfare of all parrots, and that's precisely where we remain today. In Mike Reynolds' words on the first page of the first issue, we remain, "a 'broad church': a meeting point for everyone interested in the survival of parrots in the wild, and their welfare in captivity."

We've had many successes over the years, and the details and methods of our work have evolved, yet nearly all our early articles would fit comfortably into a new 2009 issue. One clear example is our determination to stop the trade in wild parrots. Not only did Mike highlight trade as a primary threat to parrots, especially in his prescient, "Please stop the parrot holocaust" message, but trade was raised by nearly every other author in the very first issue, including Tony Juniper, Rosemary Low and Dr. Roger Wilkinson. Of course the front lines in this war-on-trade have shifted in the aftermath of success in the EU, but our resolve to see the end of trade in wild parrots remains as strong as ever.

Celebrating our 20th birthday is a great milestone in the history of the Trust and we hope many of you can join us to mark the occasion in Cornwall this summer. See p17 for details and watch *PsittaScene*, *FlockTalk* and [www.parrots.org/invitation](http://www.parrots.org/invitation) for more information.

Jamie Gilardi  
Director

## on our covers

**FRONT** *PsittaScene* No.1 went out in October 1989 with the front page headline "Introducing the World Parrot Trust." It is now translated into 7 languages and goes to 49 countries worldwide. This is just a small sampling of our 78 covers to date. © World Parrot Trust

**BACK** Nico Schoemaker started taking pictures when he was 15 years old. His favourite subjects are animals and nature. These Hyacinth Macaws (*Anodorhynchus hyacinthinus*) at sunset were photographed in the Brazilian Pantanal. Print versions are available at <http://parrots.imagekind.com> or by contacting WPT. The World Parrot Trust will receive a portion of each sale. © Nico Schoemaker



“...when scientists began studying the Sun Conure, it seemed to disappear right before their eyes.”

**THE GOLDEN BIRDS, page 4**

Photo: © Ed Andrade Jr.



# the Golden Birds of the Lost world

“Yellow, yellow, yellow! The whole tree was yellow. I thought the tree was full of flowers.”

## By Charles Bergman

BARELY ABLE TO CONTAIN HIS EXCITEMENT, our guide Andrew Albert was describing the first time he saw a particular flock of Sun Conures (*Aratinga solstitialis*)—golden birds that are both exquisitely beautiful and extremely rare.

The poetically-named Sun Conure is also called, more prosaically, the Sun Parakeet. These long-tailed parakeets are named for the sunny gold of their bodies, burnished with a fiery red and orange. They are like a glowing sunrise in miniature.

Until very recently, the Sun Conure was considered common in the wild. Scientists thought its range was huge, from the Amazon River in Brazil through the Guiana Shield in the remote northeast of South America. That perception, though, may have been a reflection of the Sun Conure's popularity in captivity. It's common as a pet, with thousands in the United States.

But when scientists began studying the Sun Conure, it seemed to disappear right before their eyes. It was not as widespread as thought, and could not be found in the wild. Then reports surfaced of this particular flock in southern Guyana – the same flock that made Andrew bloom in spontaneous poetry. As it turns out, Andrew was describing the last known flock of wild Sun Conures. These beautiful and beloved birds have suddenly become some of the rarest birds in the world.

We had come to find this same flock—the last of the Sun Conures (left).

I was with Dr. James Gilardi, Director of the World Parrot Trust. A tall man in his mid-forties, Jamie (as he likes to be called) is an expert on both parrots and the global trade in wild birds. His goal was to document these birds for science, as part of the re-evaluation of the

species—both its taxonomy and its conservation status—that is currently underway. If we found the birds, Jamie's big question was: How many are there?

This scientific expedition also had the feel of an exciting adventure. Andrew's town, Karasabai, is located in southern Guyana, where the great savanna of the Rupununi rises into the foothills of the Pakaraima Mountains. The area of tall grasses and moist forests is a biological bonanza, one of the great wild areas of South America, and even the world. Guyana is barely the size of Great Britain, yet supports over 800 bird species. In the remote south of the country, the Rupununi prides itself on many of the largest animals of their kind in the world—from largest fish (arapaima), to largest ant; from the largest anteater to the giant river otter. For these creatures, it's sometimes called the “land of giants.”

The area is still largely undiscovered by the outside world—unique, misty, mysterious. It's also a mythic landscape. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle located his novel *The Lost World* in this region. Still earlier, the great Elizabethan courtier and explorer, Sir Walter Raleigh, invested this place with desire, believing that here he would find the great wealth of “El Dorado,” the golden one. We had come looking for another kind of wealth—biological gold. We were looking for the golden birds of this lost world.

FOR THE MACUSHI AMERINDIANS WHO LIVE here, like Andrew Albert, this is not a “lost world,” of course. It is their home and heritage. His lovely village of Karasabai is near the Irenga River, which flows out of the mountains and forms the boundary here between Guyana and Brazil. One of the “toshaus” or captains of the village, Elvis Edwards, was our guide in our search for the conures just a few miles up the river.

A witty man, Elvis has lively eyes under his camouflage hat. We rode in his boat through rising hills on either side of the river. I asked Elvis if he thought we would find the conures. “Everyday,” he said. “They come to the farm everyday.” Could it be so easy to find one of the rarest birds in the world?

Also with us was Shirley Melville. A former Member of Parliament in Guyana, Shirley has a round face and a perpetual smile. She is one of the best connected people in Guyana, and said that she left Parliament so that she could work more directly on social and environmental issues in the Rupununi.

Shirley told us that the Sun Conure had been one of the most popular birds in the wild animal trade. It remains legal to trade in wild animals in Guyana, and the Sun Conure's popularity made it one of the highest demand animals in the country. Hundreds of conures were shipped out of this region at a time. Guyana was virtually trapped out, with trappers going into Brazil to find more. Still, people believed that there were many more conures in remote areas of northern Brazil.

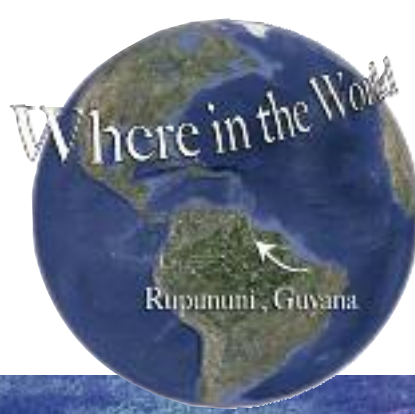
“I have never seen an uncaged conure,” Shirley said in the boat. “The biggest trapper here died in the late 90s. The numbers then were already low. A few years ago I walked through this area to convince people to stop trapping – to raise people's consciousness.”

The river narrowed and Elvis pulled our boat up to the shore beside some small canoes. We hauled our supplies to a modest compound of three small buildings. We hung our hammocks in a structure with a pitched roof and no walls.

Elvis led us up a small hill. We stood in a field of cassava plants, under the slender shade of a papaya tree. It was scant relief from the fierce sun.



Photos: © Jamie Gilardi



(Right) Most of Guyana remains forested and impressively pristine, with only rare glimpses of the presence of humans. (Above) Shirley Melville enjoys the wilderness she's helping WPT to protect. (Far right) The small farm where we stayed, surrounded by forest. The hill in the background is Brazil.



“...research has revealed how valuable the flock in Guyana now is.”

WE SAW THEM IMMEDIATELY. A flock of glittering birds screeched low and loud across the field, and disappeared into the thick forest that climbed up the steep hills behind the farm. A second, smaller group followed immediately behind them.

Jamie and I counted: 26 birds in the first, and 15 in the second group.

“They are really flashy birds,” Jamie said. “Unmistakable. Their bodies really glow.”

Elvis turned to Jamie. “So are they rare?” He asked. “Are they the rarest bird in the world?”

“Excellent question,” Jamie said. “The short answer is yes, they are one of the rarest wild parrots in the world. And that makes them one of the rarest birds.”

The longer answer is a fascinating story. Recently, Dr. Luís Fábio Silveira, an ornithologist at the University of Sao Paulo, began to look carefully at Sun Conures. His conclusions changed everything. Studying 395 specimens in museums all over the world, he concluded that the species should be split in two. He noted that the specimens for the Guiana Shield (northern Brazil and southern Venezuela, Guyana, and Surinam) were widely separated geographically from those along the Amazon River. The birds from the Amazon are different: they have more green on their backs, and the yellow and red on their bodies and heads are much paler.

Dr. Silveira published his findings in highly-prestigious journal *The Auk* in 2005, arguing that the species should be split. The Sun Conure, *Aratinga solstitialis*, is in the north and includes the birds we found near Karasabai. He named the southern species the Sulfur-breasted Parakeet, *Aratinga pintoii*, honoring an earlier Brazilian ornithologist whose note in a museum led Dr. Silveira to compare the specimens.

No one noticed the distinction earlier because, says Dr. Silveira, the Amazon specimens are mostly in Brazilian museums, whereas the specimens from the north, like Guyana, are mostly in museums in Europe and North America. They were hard to compare.

Dr. Silveira’s study inevitably focused attention on the Sun Conure in the wild. Researchers looked for them, and found none. “They had suffered a huge reduction in numbers,” Dr. Silveira said. “The situation is critical. The flock you saw is the last one in the wild.”

Two months after our visit to Guyana in search of this flock of conures, the IUCN concluded its taxonomical review by approving the split in the species. And the suddenly-isolated Sun Conures were also officially listed as “endangered.”

Dr. Silveira’s research has revealed how valuable the flock in Guyana now is. It is literally and figuratively golden.

On the farm, we watched several conures high in a gnarled tree. They rose up and flew across the river into Brazil.

“It’s truly a multi-national flock of birds,” Jamie said.

“Tomorrow, they’ll be back,” Elvis said to us. “They’ll come down close. Tame, tame, tame. You’ll see.”

WE WOKE IN OUR HAMMOCKS the next morning to a cool fog and red howler monkeys roaring in Brazil. The conures got active early. We could hear them shrieking in the twisted trees just up the hill from the cassava field.

Elvis said the birds come down into the fields about 9 a.m., when we could see them close up. Jamie and I were in the field early, below a dead tree.

At 9:10, a group of four Sun Conures landed suddenly in the bare branches of the dead tree, as if on cue. They flew away immediately, but when we turned around, another group of about eight birds was feeding in the low bushes on the other side of the cassava field. More birds were on the branches of a cecropia just above them.

At close range, the birds were breathtakingly beautiful. I had seen photographs, but I was not prepared for the radiance of the birds. Their long tails and their mossy-green wings were both edged in royal blue. But their bodies were what defined them. They are like flakes of the flaming sun. Even



The juvenile Sun Conure, *A. solstitialis* (above right), has pale green on the throat and chest and less orange on the face and head than the adult (above left). This is important because the Sulfur-breasted Parakeet, *A. pintoii*, looks like a juvenile *A. solstitialis*. These similarities and differences were important in the initial confusion which lumped them, and in clarifying the recent split.



These young birds are mock fighting and seem to have no clue that their family represents about 10% of the known birds of their kind left in the wild.

## It is literally and figuratively golden."

in the dull light of this foggy morning, their yellows and reds shimmered and shined.

Jamie pointed out that several of the birds were young ones. "See the green on their backs," he said. "As they mature, that becomes yellow." The young were playing with each other, nipping at each other's feet, and begging from the adults with wings quivering.

"The population is reproducing, and that's not always the case with rare parrots," Jamie said. "A positive sign."

In addition to documenting numbers, Jamie was also considering conservation projects for these parakeets. "The question is to decide what might be worth doing," he said.

Jamie noted that the habitat was abundant in the area. "Pristine," he said. "And there's tons of it. It was the trade that did these birds in, not habitat loss. This particular flock is well-established."

"Almost anything is possible, though," he said. "We'd partner with the local village or a local NGO, tourist lodges in the Rupununi, the government. Maybe we could release captive birds in other areas to help the species recover."

As beautiful as the birds were, they were also irresistibly curious and charming. They were unperturbed at being so close to us. They often looked at us with a wide-eyed gaze, at once intelligent and innocent.

They stayed in the field for an hour or so, feeding and playing, as Elvis had predicted. Then they flew higher up the rugged slopes of the high hills. Elvis said they would be around all day, until mid-afternoon, when they would fly over the hills for the night.

Why was this flock at this farm? Where had it come from? Jamie said it's hard to know for sure. But Elvis offered a theory. "I think these birds were trapped out in the 1990s. Maybe then some escaped from trappers. They re-populated and that's why they're here."

SOME REPORTS HAD SUGGESTED that this final flock of Sun Conures might have as many as 200 birds. We searched the area for three days and saw about 60 birds. As Jamie pointed out, we did not always know if we were counting new birds. Both the World Parrot Trust and Dr. Silveira are beginning more extensive surveys in northern Brazil for more conures.

As we searched the area, we had exhilarating, close experiences not only with Sun Conures, but also with giant anteaters and jabiru storks. I have also seen giant river otters up close in the region. The Rupununi must be one of the great and still-undiscovered wild places of South America. Shirley agreed saying, "I really feel the Rupununi is number one in conservation in Guyana."

She told us that the Guyanese government had just listed the Sun Conure as endangered. With this "endangered" status locally and the revised

listing from the IUCN, the Sun Conures will be better protected from trapping and the trade.

Perhaps the best news for the Sun Conures of southern Guyana is that Elvis, Andrew, and others in their village increasingly realize they are the guardians of a living treasure.

I asked Elvis what he sees when he looks at these conures.

"I see the beauty of the universe," he said. "Now we are having our eyes opened to the value of each and every parakeet. They will be here all the time if we don't trap. I'm totally against bird trapping. I'm in favor of bird watching."

Charles Bergman is an English professor at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma WA, USA. He specializes in nature writing.



# Suns rise in Brazil



Nature and all its different shapes and colors were always a passion for me. I love watching birds in their wild habitats. I also enjoy watching the birds that live in the urban environment. Wherever they are, I enjoy trying to identify them by their calls, way of flying and other characteristics.



In January 2008, in the city of Boa Vista, Brazil, a new call caught my attention. To my surprise, it came from a pair of brightly colored birds which impressed me for their astonishing beauty.

Quickly I called my husband to bring his new camera and our urban parrot adventure began. Soon we learned that we had just taken the first known photographs of Sun Conures in the city of Boa Vista. The pictures were uploaded to Flickr ([www.flickr.com/photos/edandradejunior](http://www.flickr.com/photos/edandradejunior)) and were soon rolling around the world.



Researchers believe Sun Conures in an urban environment like Boa Vista are escapees from captivity that have adapted to a feral lifestyle. In urban environments there is less pressure from poaching as rural birds may be killed for food or captured for the illegal trade.

"Home gardens" are common in tropical countries and might also contribute to the bird's success. This bird is eating sprouts from the caimbé flower.





By Larissa M. Diehl  
Photos © Ed Andrade Jr.

This flock of ten conures seems to be composed of one or two adult pairs, some youngsters and juveniles.

In November 2008, after almost a year of intense searching by Ed, we located a nest of 6 conures. To our surprise, the nest was inside a concrete pole.



The Boa Vista flock may have originated from a 2006 confiscation of 10 chicks. In our research we learned of these birds and the fact that their holding cage had been found open.

However, as this flock contains juveniles and new fledglings, it seems clear that the birds are now breeding and enjoying life in the city.

We have been working at the Burrowing Parrot colony of El C6ndor in NE Patagonia, Argentina since October 1998. Over all those years, one thing that has become more and more clear for us, to the local people and to the friends of nature everywhere, is the immense value of this

# NATURAL WONDER

# NATURAL

by Juan F. Masello



Our work includes intensive research particularly in the breeding biology and the behavioral ecology of the Burrowing Parrot, or Patagonian Conure (*Cyanoliseus patagonus*) and this, its major colony. Education has also played an important role in our work since the beginning. We have spread the word about the colony through lectures, guided visits, leaflets and many articles in 9 different languages. The value of this cliff-side colony, known to few people since the time Charles Darwin visited the place, was severely underestimated. Over time we have worked on increasing awareness of the amazing fact that this is the largest colony of parrots known to exist anywhere in the world.

Finally after years of work in our educational campaign, the importance of the colony and the necessity for its protection started to receive strong support among the local people and media. In addition, recent work has also demonstrated that the area around El C6ndor is a refuge for important biodiversity. Our surveys around the parrot colony, particularly the remaining Monte patches and the marshlands (“marismas”) of the R6o Negro river, host a rich biodiversity, which includes at least 176 bird species, an important population of bottlenose dolphins, the southernmost population of Franciscana dolphins, and a large population and spawning area of several vulnerable Patagonian fish species.

Based on the importance of the Burrowing Parrot colony and on the presence of 9 globally threatened birds species, Aves Argentinas, following our advice, declared El C6ndor an Important Bird Area (IBA) under the program carried out all over the planet by BirdLife International. Currently, it is considered one of the 4 “high priority” IBAs within Patagonia. Nevertheless, it is the only IBA of the province of R6o Negro lacking legal protection. The lack of legal protection



Photo: © Mauricio Failla

poses serious risks. First, there are still some local farmers who claim that the parrots are a serious pest (see *PsittaScene* 17, N64: 10-11), and repeatedly ask the government to exterminate them (something that has been tried in the past, see *PsittaScene* 15, N6 4: 12-13). Second, some local politicians want to build more ramps through the cliffs in the parrot colony in order to easily reach the beach at the bottom with their cars. Third, the village of El C6ndor is expanding very quickly, menacing biodiversity-rich sections of the IBA. And last but not least, the Monte vegetation, the ecosystem sustaining the parrots and the terrestrial biodiversity at El C6ndor, is disappearing at a rate of 3.7% per year: four times faster than the clearance of the Amazon.

Our next step was clear – to pursue the legal protection and declaration of El C6ndor area as Nature Reserve of the

# WONDER

## IBA DESIGNATION brings parrot colony closer to protection



Photo: © Matthias Helmer

The Burrowing Parrot nesting cliff at El Cóndor, Patagonia, Argentina is the world's largest parrot colony with an average of 35,000 active nests spread over 12 km (7.5 mi) of cliffs facing the South Atlantic Ocean.

province of Río Negro in Patagonia, Argentina. During 2007-08, we achieved very important steps in pursuing this legal protection. First, two main parties at the local government confirmed their intention of legally protecting the area. Next, the proposal needs to be discussed at the Parliament, something that, at present, we are intensively pursuing together with the World Parrot Trust, the Dirección de Fauna Silvestre of Río Negro, Wildlife Conservation Society, Liz Claiborne / Art Ortenberg Foundation, Fundación Patagonia Natural, Fundación Ameghino and Aves Argentinas.

During a recent interview in October 2008, an influential representative and ex-minister of Río Negro assured the BBC journalist that "the Act Proposal for the creation of the Nature Reserve at El Cóndor will be discussed at the Parliament during the 2009 legislative sessions."

In order to spread the word regarding the importance of the IBA El Cóndor and the urgent necessity of approving the Act Proposal that would declare it a Nature Reserve, we held an "opening" event in November 2008. We hosted an official opening of the signs that mark the starting points of the two core sectors of the El Cóndor IBA (the parrot colony and the marshes of the Río Negro river). We designed colorful signs together with Aves Argentinas and the Dirección de Fauna Silvestre of Río Negro. For the official opening, we invited every possible politician of Río Negro and ... they all came! This was very good news that let us hope for the creation of the Nature Reserve in 2009!

View a January 2009 BBC interview with Juan and links to our numerous articles on this species at [www.parrots.org/burrowingparrots](http://www.parrots.org/burrowingparrots)



# THANK YOU

## WE'RE A GREAT TEAM!

We gratefully acknowledge all World Parrot Trust donors who have supported our parrot conservation and welfare work this year.



Photo: © Nico J. Schoemaker, <http://www.animalphotos.nl>

While we cannot list all of your individual contributions, these efforts give you an idea of how much we can achieve when we work together.

### **Ending the Wild Bird Trade**

In November 2008 long-time WPT supporters Bill and Terry Pelster generously agreed to match each trade-related donation to a combined total of US \$30,000. You did the rest! We met this goal in 42 days with support from over 225 individuals worldwide! This effort plus US \$30,000 from the Folke Peterson Foundation will allow us to accelerate our efforts to end this unsustainable and damaging trade.

### **Hurricane Ike and the parrots of Inagua**

After a Category 4 hurricane hit this small island, we received an urgent call from pet products manufacturer Mark Hagen, seeking to aid the Bahamas Parrots. He personally funded Phases I and II of a 3-part research project to be conducted by parrot biologist Caroline Stahala.

### **Thick-billed Parrot conservation**

Donations from the Keith Ewart Charitable Trust and the Donner Canadian Foundation will allow us to continue to support Thick-billed Parrot recovery and expand research into new areas.

### **Parrot conservation and care seminars**

The Donner Canadian Foundation also provided financial support for the development of a series of online and telephone-based seminars for parrot enthusiasts. Due to launch in spring 2009, this innovative tool will bring leading experts to parrot enthusiasts everywhere.

### **Conserving the worlds rarest wild macaw**

Special thanks to the Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium, International Association of Avian Trainers (IAATE), Natural Encounters, Inc., Minnesota Zoo and Raleigh-Durham Caged Bird Society for recent donations to our Blue-throated Macaw project.

### **Saving the wild Greys**

Over 300 individual donors supported our recent efforts on behalf of Grey Parrots. Thanks to John Strutt, Franziska Vogel, Peter Molesworth, Evet Lowen and the Keith Ewart Charitable Trust, the WPT was able to provide rescue and rehabilitation support to 1227 confiscated Greys. Our efforts to aid this species will be expanded this year due to a recent donation from the Eleanor Lloyd Dees Family Foundation.

**Additional support** came from Blackpool Zoo, Drayton Manor Zoo, Fota Wildlife Park, Paulton's Park, Saitama Children's Zoo, Banham Zoo and Paradise Park, home of the Trust.

And finally, selling fudge, truffles and trade bands Melanie Tate of Portugal raised 261 euros for the Trust. Shirley Paver, UK, sought sponsors for an overnight vigil at Newhaven Fort in Sussex and raised £200. And Dave Kramer of DJ Feathers Aviary in Virginia, USA raised funds by taking Santa photos with customers and their birds.

# Thank You

Since the 2007 permanent trade ban on all wild caught bird imports we at the World Parrot Trust have shifted our trade work to a country-by-country approach. By targeting key markets responsible for much of the remaining bird trade, and developing important working relationships with regional organizations, we hope to build upon and expand our efforts to end this cruel and wasteful trade.

Globally, the commercial trade in wildlife is increasingly seen as an unethical practice in the modern world. Dramatic policy shifts in places like the USA, EU and recently Mexico, strongly suggest that the end of the wild bird trade – and possibly wildlife trade in general – may be on the horizon.

Still, the wild bird trade is a complex issue with an array of players, circumstances and variables. Two of our recent projects demonstrate the dynamic nature of the trade and the variety of fronts needing focused attention and action. We are excited to take our work on trade into these new and interesting directions – opening up dialogue and bringing knowledge to light to protect wild birds.

## Southeast Asia

Over the past 12-months the Trust has undertaken several initiatives in this region. During a coalition-building trip to Asia last December, World Parrot Trust Director Jamie Gilardi hosted a key meeting with parrot and trade experts from Bali, Jakarta and our partner organization Profauna, on the issue of parrots in trade in Indonesia. Their discussions highlighted the priority status of Papua New Guinea as the primary source of birds being traded throughout the rest of Indonesia. Therefore, our initial focus was on developing and funding Profauna's efforts to draw attention to that trade, stop importations and prosecute violators trapping and trading protected species. Among many positive milestones so far was a campaign demonstration (top right) to urge the government to stop parrot smuggling.

## Mexico

Out of all 33 countries in Central America, South America and the Caribbean, Mexico has the dubious distinction of being the main importing country for wild caught birds originating from Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean.

Educational efforts to halt this massive trade were initiated last year by the World Parrot Trust and our partner in Mexico – Defenders of Wildlife. The effort is aimed at stopping the local trade in parrots through a poster and comic book campaign. Parrots are still traded in the open in Mexican markets and this initiative focuses on educating the public to understand that: it is illegal to buy parrots; buying is part of the illegal trade; and, buying kills parrots.

The posters include both comic images and a series of comic images and paintings depicting endangered species. The main message is "You Can Save It – Don't Buy Wild Parrots." We will help produce seven different posters for this series – two macaws and seven amazons, all of which are endangered. So far, six different images have been completed and distribution has begun.

In a recent major development, the Mexican government has permanently outlawed the trapping and export of their native parrots – a huge step forward and one that dovetails perfectly with our work to stop the wild parrot trade in this country. Indeed this ban leads directly into our hope to dramatically reduce both domestic demand for native Mexican parrots, and that country's continued practice of importing wild caught birds. It provides an unprecedented level of protection for Mexico's 22 species of parrots and macaws.

In the coming year we look forward to supplementing these educational efforts with online initiatives, including a dedicated website and related campaigns, to build an even broader support base in the country.

Learn more: [www.parrots.org/stopthetrade](http://www.parrots.org/stopthetrade)



Photos: © Defenders of Wildlife



# Nothing but **Fear** itself



"Look. It's just a string bean. See? It won't hurt you."

Have you ever found yourself having a similar conversation with your parrot? You could replace "string bean" with whatever object or situation causes a fear response from your bird. It's really incredible what some parrots find frightening! However, as silly as it might seem to us, to our birds it is serious business. Fear responses are no laughing matter.

This issue's contributor **Barbara Heidenreich**, has been a professional in the field of animal training since 1990. She owns and operates Good Bird, Inc., ([www.goodbirdinc.com](http://www.goodbirdinc.com)) that provides behavior and training products to the companion parrot community. Products and services include Good Bird magazine, consulting services, behaviour and training workshops as well as books and videos. Several of Barbara's titles are available via WPT.

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Preventing and reducing fear responses in your bird has many potential benefits. It has the potential to create a more engaging companion parrot. It can also lead to the reduction of stress. I recall visiting a home for a consultation to discover a very wide eyed, trembling Umbrella Cockatoo. This sensitive bird showed fear responses to almost everything. The slightest movements by anyone in the area created a reaction. This bird also exhibited feather damaging behavior. It is certainly possible that the bird used such behavior as a stress coping mechanism. Fortunately by giving this cockatoo a chance to experience the world through positive reinforcement training strategies, it was given a new lease on life.

## Positive Methods to Reduce Fear

Positive reinforcement strategies involve focusing on kind and gentle methods to teach your bird that circumstances that were once frightening now result in desired consequences. To better demonstrate how to apply the principles let's work through an example. Imagine trying to introduce a new toy into the cage of a bird that responds with fear behaviors.

As you approach the bird's cage with the new toy you observe a fear response: the bird quickly moves to the back of the cage away from the approaching toy. Instead of putting the toy in the cage anyway, you take a few steps back until he



It is our job to learn to be sensitive to the body language that indicates whether or not our parrots are comfortable with a situation.

## Article and Photos by Barbara Heidenreich



### What does a fear response look like?

When frightened, parrots will often try to move or lean away from what they fear. Their eyes may be open wide as they present darting looks in search of an escape path. Many parrots will stand tall and slick their feathers down tight to their body. Parrots with crest feathers often raise their crests. Feather quivering, slightly open mouth and rocking side to side motions may also sometimes be associated with fear responses.

shows behavior that indicates comfort. You then gently and slowly place the toy on the floor in the bird's line of sight. Each day you move the toy slightly closer to the cage, paying attention to whether or not the bird displays any behavior indicative of fear. If you notice fear responses, you move the toy away from the cage until the bird shows calm behavior. Over time you are able to get the toy right next to the cage. Next, you gently hang the toy on the outside of the cage away from food or water bowls (you don't want your bird to be driven away from his resources by fear). This process is known as systematic desensitization. It is the idea of gradually exposing a subject to fear producing stimuli, starting with

the least frightening situation and working towards the most frightening while the subject remains in a relaxed state.

After you have achieved this success, you can now focus on using positive reinforcement to train your bird to approach the new toy. An easy way to do this is to use a target. Targeting involves teaching your bird to orient a body part towards something. The target can be the end of a chopstick, a closed fist, or any object you choose. Usually parrots are trained to orient their beak towards the target. If your bird knows how to follow a target, you can present the target to the bird in the cage away from the toy. Gradually move the target closer and

closer to the new toy. Each approximation is reinforced with food or another desired positive reinforcer. If your bird is especially fearful, many small approximations may be required. It may take several training sessions for your bird to move close enough to the new toy to touch it.

Now that your bird is close to the toy, you can work on teaching him to touch it. One strategy to encourage this action is to place treats on the toy. At this stage in the process the bird might be willing to take the treat off of the toy. This behavior can be further encouraged with more reinforcers offered from your hand after the "bait" is eaten. After the bird retrieves several treats placed on the toy, it is likely he may touch the toy without the need for a treat as a lure. At this point a bridge and positive reinforcer can be offered after the bird makes the effort to touch the toy. If touching the toy is particularly challenging, a treat can be held in such a way that the bird must accidentally touch the toy to retrieve the treat. If needed, approximations can continue to include touching the toy for longer periods of time or actually manipulating it with the beak.

Another teaching strategy that can also be beneficial is modeling or observational learning. At a distance at which the bird is comfortable you can demonstrate interacting with the toy yourself. You can also have your parrot watch another bird interacting with the toy.

If your bird knows how to target, you can use this behaviour to help him learn to approach a new toy.





## Do

- Learn to recognize the slightest indication of a fear response in your bird
- Use systematic desensitization – gradually expose your bird to what is creating a fear response
- Train the desired behavior with positive reinforcement
- Use small approximations
- Reinforce calm behavior
- Allow the process to take time
- Pair positive reinforcers with whatever is creating a fear response
- Use modeling – you or another bird can demonstrate the desired response

## Don't

- Don't create even the slightest fear response
- Don't use flooding
- Don't force a bird to participate when it is frightened
- Don't rush for results

## Common Pitfalls

Using positive reinforcement to address fear responses has been shown to be effective time and time again. However, it can present challenges, especially if the companion parrot owner is anxious for quick results. Impatience may lead to compromises in training strategies. This in turn can lead to failure. Fine tuning your sensitivity to recognizing fear responses is an important component in the training process. A “little afraid” is a “little” too much. Avoiding creating fear responses is important to success with positive reinforcement strategies. This fear response is often increased when owners try to use force to create the behavior. Forcing a bird to remain in the presence of a highly feared stimulus until fear responses subside is called flooding. This process is extremely stressful and traumatic for the bird and certainly not required to get the desired result as the example presented demonstrates.

The example presented is just one situation. There are many different scenarios which might create a fear response in your bird. Therefore it is helpful to think through the approximations for the particular situation you are trying to address prior to training. Apply the recommended “Do’s and Don’ts” in each situation.

Systematic desensitization can help your parrot learn to accept new toys.

## Fear Responses and Young Parrots

Young parrots offer a unique opportunity to prevent fear related behaviors. Breeders that are able to expose young birds to new environments, new people, objects and materials they may encounter later in life (such as kennels, nail clippers, towels, etc.) can make a big impact. Very young birds are typically receptive to the introduction of new things. Care still should be taken to introduce new things slowly as well as associate positive reinforcers with the new items. This is because a bird’s first experience with something can have lasting impact. For example if the first time a bird went into a kennel was because it was shoved or forced into it, it will be more challenging to train that behavior with positive reinforcement in the future. If a bird’s first experience with entering a kennel was based on positive reinforcement training strategies and at some point the bird needs to be forced into the kennel, it is more likely the behavior will be easily recovered. A young bird provides a great opportunity to create a wealth of positive experiences with new objects and different situations. Take advantage of this critical time period.

Paralyzed with fear? Unlikely. Parrots are more prone to seek opportunities to escape or avoid a situation they find frightening. Avoidance is certainly contradictory with the goal of trying to create the best relationship possible with a companion parrot. Focus on showing sensitivity to fear responses and using positive reinforcement to turn a fearful feathered friend into a confident companion.





## Hold the Date(s)

June 30 & July 1, 2009

### WPT's 20th Anniversary Celebration

Paradise Park, Hayle, Cornwall, UK.

uk@worldparrottrust.org / 01736 753365

Celebrate with us, meet WPT Staff and Trustees, Project Personnel, and enjoy a behind-the-scenes visit to Paradise Park.

**RSVP** limited availability - please contact Karen Whitley by 30th April to register interest

**Alan Derrick** finds inspiration in **feathers** to create unique larger-than-life **metal sculptures**.

The sculpture entitled "Ancient Voyager", (top left - 54"h x 24"w x 6"d) will be auctioned on eBay to support the World Parrot Trust.

The auction will be listed under "Art, Direct from Artist, Sculptures" starting on March 22nd and ending on March 29th at 9:00pm EST.

Derrick says the colouration and light-refracting qualities of feathers are unequalled elsewhere in nature. He duplicates and enhances these qualities in his studio, situated on 10-wooded acres at the base of a mountain in Alabama, to create one-of-a-kind fine art sculptures.

Visit Alan Derrick's website at [www.Derrick.com](http://www.Derrick.com) or call (256) 776-4762 for more information.

"In Your Face" (left & background - 24"h x 18"w x 6"d) is available on the World Parrot Trust eStore.



# Psitta News



Photo: © NEI



Photo: © T Jupp

## Parrotevents

### Canadian Parrot Workshop 2009

April 18 and 19, 2009. Holiday Inn and Convention Centre, Barrie, Ontario, Canada

This is an annual two-day activity-based workshop featuring Dr. Susan Friedman, PhD, ([www.behaviorworks.org](http://www.behaviorworks.org)) an expert in the field of applied behaviour analysis, and world renowned animal trainer Barbara Heidenreich ([www.goodbirdinc.com](http://www.goodbirdinc.com)).

Continuing Education credits are available to veterinary technicians. Proceeds benefit the World Parrot Trust.

- 📄 [www.parrotworkshops.org](http://www.parrotworkshops.org)
- ✉ [danielle@parrotworkshops.org](mailto:danielle@parrotworkshops.org)
- ☎ 1-866-919-2473

### Pennies4Parrots

Collect spare change to benefit WPT's Thick-billed Parrot program. The challenge runs through November 2009.

- 📄 [www.pennies4parrots.ca](http://www.pennies4parrots.ca)

### Behaviour, Training & Enrichment

May 9-10, 2009. Paradise Park, Cornwall, UK

This 2-day workshop is designed for the current or prospective pet parrot owner who would like a more rewarding and fulfilling relationship with their bird. You'll leave with the basic methods and tools to begin immediately to teach your bird(s) using positive reinforcement.

*"I came back from the course with a greater understanding and appreciation of my birds, and the ability to improve my training skills - everything I wanted to achieve and more. I was very impressed with the content of the course, and the variety of activities."*

Reserve your spot by 31st March:

- 📄 [www.parrots.org/trainingcourse](http://www.parrots.org/trainingcourse)
- ✉ [uk@worldparrottrust.org](mailto:uk@worldparrottrust.org)
- ☎ Karen Whitley - 01736 751026

### The BEST Parrot Conference

May 29-31, 2009. Edison, NJ, USA

BEST stands for Behavior, Enrichment, Science and Training. This conference features a lecture followed by a truly hands-on experience. Speakers include Barbara Heidenreich of Good Bird, Inc., Robin Shewokis of The Leather Elves, Joanna Eckles of the World Parrot Trust and Dr. Susan Friedman.

- 📄 [www.bestparrotconference.com](http://www.bestparrotconference.com)

### International Parrot Symposium

June 26-28, 09. Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland

Ireland's first International Parrot Symposium will take place in the famous 15th century Trinity College in the heart of Dublin. WPT Director Jamie Gilardi will be among 16 keynote speakers from all over the world.

- 📄 <http://www.parrotssymposium.com>

### Parrot Lover's Cruise

October 29, 2009.

Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, USA



Join parrot enthusiasts on this 8 day fundraising cruise to the exotic Western Caribbean visiting Cozumel, Mexico; Limon, Costa Rica; and Colon, Panama.

Speakers include: Dr James Morrissey DVM, Cornell University; Robin Shewokis, Specialist in foraging and enrichment, the Leather Elves; and Lara Joseph, Companion Parrot Behaviourist specialising in Cockatoos.

A \$50 donation from each booking will go to the World Parrot Trust. Room availability is limited, so book early!

- 📄 [www.parrotloverscruise.com](http://www.parrotloverscruise.com)
- ✉ [baldmantravel@gmail.com](mailto:baldmantravel@gmail.com)
- ☎ Carol Cipriano, 1-570-226-2569

## Parrotnews

### Cockatoo halts mega-development

A proposed residential mega-development in Mandurah (Western Australia) will have to get special approval after a government department decided it would affect the endangered Carnaby's Black Cockatoo.

The project could have a "significant impact" on foraging habitat for the cockatoo. The department believes that the development, as submitted, would not "suitably allow" for the long-term protection of the cockatoo and "strongly" encouraged the company to retain larger areas for habitat.

The cockatoo, which is native to south west WA, is classified as endangered by the Federal Government due to land clearing, which reduced its foraging roosting and breeding habitats. They feed in higher-rainfall areas near the coast.

Source: <http://www.watoday.com.au>

### Bargain 2009 Calendars



£6/US\$8 incl. shipping  
[www.parrots.org/calendar](http://www.parrots.org/calendar)

### New DVD

"Understanding Parrot Body Language" This is one of the most important skills you can learn to help you build a relationship with your parrot, based on trust.



£16.95/US\$21.95 incl. shipping  
[www.parrots.org/DVD](http://www.parrots.org/DVD)



Photo: © ABC

### Orange-bellied parrot releases

A captive breeding program in Tasmania is trying to increase the number of orange-bellied parrots released into the wild as the population falls to just 100. About 50 birds from Tasmania will be released this year.

Source: <http://www.abc.net.au>

### Finally...

A woman soccer fan from Hatfield, England has been banned from taking her pet parrot to soccer matches after the bird disrupted a game by constantly imitating the referee's whistle.

Source: <http://www.scoop.co.nz>

### New ideas welcome!

If you have a great idea to help us raise funds for parrots please contact our offices directly.

## PollyVision II is a hit!

Launched just months ago, PollyVision II: Parrots of the Americas was WPT's most purchased holiday item this season. Created to combat birdie boredom it contains stunning footage of parrots in the wild as they socialise, communicate and soar freely through the skies. This DVD is a must-have for your feathered friends.

*I received PollyVision II today and was very, very, impressed... I was sooo surprised to see the footage of all those macaws! The footage you filmed on them was outstanding! Nice job to all who were involved in the making of that DVD and if you don't have it yet, it's a must!*  
Gerry – WPT Member



## Thankyou

### Macaw fan helps Blue-throats

Melissa McHugh is a fifth grade student at Fishkill Plains Elementary in Wappingers Falls, NY USA. When working on a special assignment, her interest in animals turned into a passion for saving the critically endangered Blue-throated Macaw.

Melissa conducted extensive research for over a year and connected with WPT's Glenn Reynolds. After much planning and hard work, Melissa held a fundraiser in her school raising \$150 for the Blue-throated Macaw project, and educating her entire elementary school, children and adults alike!

Source: *Jill Mierisch, Fishkill Plains Elementary*



Better yet, order PollyVision I & II together and save!

£9.95/US\$20 each or  
£15/US\$30 for both incl. shipping  
[www.parrots.org/pollyvision](http://www.parrots.org/pollyvision)

## Online

Main: [parrots.org](http://parrots.org)

Languages: Dutch, Finnish, German, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish and Swedish

Japan: [worldparrottrustjapan.org](http://worldparrottrustjapan.org)

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# Parrots in the Wild

