

# PSITTASCENE

Magazine of the WORLD PARROT TRUST



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### ABOUT THE WPT

Capture for the live-bird trade, habitat loss and other factors put wild parrots at risk. Nearly 30% of all parrot species are considered by IUCN to be globally threatened.

As an international leader in parrot conservation and welfare, the World Parrot Trust works with researchers, in-country organisations, communities and governments to encourage effective solutions that save parrots.

Since 1989 the WPT has grown to become a global force that moves quickly to address urgent issues and support long-term projects. Over that time WPT has led or aided conservation and welfare projects in 45 countries for more than 80 species of parrot.

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### ON THE COVER

Photo © Ondřej Prosický | Dreamstime.com

Wild Grey Parrot (*Psittacus erithacus*) Uganda, Africa.

The iconic Grey Parrot struggles to gain a secure foothold in its native Africa. One of the reasons is habitat loss.

Learn more in *Parrots and Palms*, Page 8.



*an introduction from...*  
**Rowan's desk**

There is something special about Grey Parrots. It's impossible not to be captivated by the social antics of a flock feasting together in a palm or the pandemonium of huge groups wheeling in the darkening sky as they assemble at a communal roost. Cognitive scientists marvel at their unrivalled ability to communicate, solve problems and work together. It is perhaps no surprise that they feature in many stories and hold a special place within popular culture as one of the cleverest, and indeed wisest, of animals - it was a Grey Parrot from West Africa named Polynesia that taught Dr. Doolittle how to talk to the animals, and she always outsmarted everyone else.

In 2012, African Grey Parrots were split into two species by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature - the Timneh (*Psittacus timneh*) and the Grey Parrot (*Psittacus erithacus*). Sadly, in 2016 both species were categorised as Endangered. Decades of plundering the once abundant wild flocks, combined with the destruction of forests, had taken their toll. The plight of these parrots had become yet another salutary lesson in how an abundant and widespread species can be vulnerable to unchecked exploitation.

While the future of these birds in some areas may seem bleak, there is cause for hope. Across tropical Africa, there is a growing band of individuals and organisations working to protect populations, end trapping and rewild the species in protected areas. In 2017, the legal international trade in wild Grey and Timneh Parrots was finally brought to a close. Since then, the profile of "African Greys" has surged, their plight now recognised by national governments and leading conservation organisations. Grey Parrots now regularly have a place on the agenda at major international meetings. Within Africa a new generation of conservationists is emerging, knowledgeable of the challenges and armed with innovative ideas.

In this special issue we hear from people on the ground across West, Central and East Africa working hard to make a difference in ways large and small for Grey and Timneh Parrots. Hopefully these stories are both informative and inspiring. If Polynesia really could read this and talk to the animals (including those lumbering naked apes that think they are so clever) I wonder what she'd say?



*Dr. Rowan Martin*  
 WPT Africa Programme Director



Grey Parrot © Pacostacon, Getty Images

In 2013, the World Parrot Trust ramped up efforts to protect Grey and Timneh Parrots through the launch of the Africa Conservation Programme. At the time both species were considered to be "Least Concern" and captured in the wild in their thousands for a thriving and legal international trade. Over the last decade, we've led and supported a multi-faceted programme aimed at protecting wild populations and ending the trade. As with all our work, the WPT has taken a diverse approach always tailored to the local needs and situation, employing in country staff and forging partnerships and collaborations with local NGOs, activists, rescue centres, universities, governments — and the odd parrot!

# LIBASSA WILDLIFE SANCTUARY: TACKLING THE TRADE IN TIMNEHS

ARTICLE AND PHOTOS BY LIBASSA WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

**Liberia is a small country tucked between Sierra Leone and Ivory Coast in West Africa. It is home to lush tropical forests, flocks of Endangered Timneh Parrots (*Psittacus timneh*) and importantly, Libassa Wildlife Sanctuary.**

Since October 2016 it has been illegal in Liberia to hunt, buy, sell, capture, keep as a pet or eat protected animals. This clear legislation, combined with a dedicated law enforcement team known as the Wildlife Crime Task Force, has led to a large number of animals being seized.

Libassa Wildlife Sanctuary plays a critical role in tackling illegal wildlife trade through a formal partnership with the government body, Forestry Development Authority (FDA), which receives animals confiscated from traffickers. In its eight years of operation, the sanctuary has received 898 animals (including 115 Timneh Parrots) comprising over 70 species, of which 414 have been returned back into their natural habitats.

The World Parrot Trust and Libassa first forged a relationship in 2015, with WPT advising on the care of three Timneh Parrots rescued from roadside sellers around Monrovia. While initially most seizures were of relatively small groups being sold locally, increased awareness of the parrot trade has seen more seizures, including large groups destined for international trade, taking place.



**Top Left:** Box containing 48 wild caught Timneh Parrots, April 2023

**Top Right:** Timneh Parrots seized from a poacher in Grand Cedehe, June 2023

**Middle Right:** Libassa Wildlife Sanctuary, the World Parrot Trust and FDA assessing possible release sites

**Bottom Right:** Dr. Rowan Martin giving first response training to the Wildlife Crime Task Force Unit, Liberia

Last year, the sanctuary received two large groups of parrots containing 73 seized in Grand Cedehe County. These birds were rescued from illegal trade following training and awareness activities in the area conducted by the Centre for Environment, Forest Conservation and Research (CENFOR) and funded through the WPT/NECF Parrot Conservation Grant programme.

Tip-offs were verified and the information shared with law enforcement officers from the Forest Development Authority (FDA) and the Special Wildlife Investigation Unit (SWIU). An impressive, coordinated response saw both parrot traffickers charged, fined and given suspended sentences by the Grand Cedehe court. One of them, a Ghanaian national, admitted to having hunted parrots for many years in both Liberia and other countries. When his home was searched, parrot trapping paraphernalia (glue, nets and ropes) was found and confiscated.

In 2022, Dr. Davide de Guz and WPT's Dr. Rowan Martin partnered with Libassa to deliver "First Responder" training to 10 members of the Confiscation Unit of the Wildlife Crime Task Force. The training involved a combination of classroom and practical sessions and concentrated on basic care of confiscated birds, including handling and transport to minimise stress and injury. The visit also provided the opportunity to assess current husbandry practices, including aviary set-up, diet



and provision of veterinary care at the sanctuary, as well as to train the team on all aspects of their upkeep. In addition, Dr. de Guz conducted health checks of all the parrots and screened for diseases using a mobile PCR machine. A year later, Davide returned together with Dr. Antonella Palese; both had been in neighbouring Ivory Coast attending to seized parrots at Abidjan Zoo. When the news came in of another seizure arriving in Libassa, they modified their travel plans to help out.

As I write, plans are being made for the release of the parrots that have recovered from their ordeal. The release site is being chosen carefully, taking into account the government stipulation that all animals released in Liberia must be within areas formally protected by the FDA. We must also consider suitable habitat, the current and former presence of wild populations, proximity to humans, local infrastructure, logistics and ease of post-release monitoring.

We look forward to the day these birds are returned to the wild and ensuring these magnificent parrots get to live out their lives in freedom as they are entitled to do. 📍



**Top:** Dr. Davide de Guz provides hands-on training to the Wildlife Crime Task Force Unit

**Middle and Bottom:** Timneh Parrots at Libassa Wildlife Sanctuary

# PARROTS AND PALMS

**G**rey Parrots (*Psittacus erithacus*) range from western Africa through to the continent's rainforest centre. Their wild spaces are dwindling due to the quest to expand areas for agro-commodity cultivation, which consequently impacts vital habitats of the parrots. On the other side lies illegal trafficking, a critical threat that the birds have struggled to survive in an increasingly human-driven world.

**Researcher and World Parrot Trust Nigeria Coordinator, Ifeanyi Ezenwa, takes us through the complex and sensitive issues that afflict Grey Parrots in Nigeria.**



## Background to the problem

On a global scale, the agricultural sector plays a central role in exacerbating the decline of biodiversity, actively contributing to the degradation of natural habitats. The adoption of intensive agricultural practices aggravates this issue, posing a direct threat to the conservation of numerous species.

Recent forecasts have raised an alarm, pointing towards an anticipated surge in the degradation of tropical rainforest ecosystems, particularly within the African Continent. This threatening projection is closely tied to the inherent suitability of these regions for cultivating lucrative cash crops, including cocoa, rubber, coffee and oil palm. The cultivation of these cash crops doesn't come without its ecological consequences; they exact a significant toll on biodiversity.

© 8213erica, Getty Images



This reality presents a tough challenge, as striking a balance between conservation efforts for Africa’s diverse flora and fauna and addressing the ever-growing demand for increased revenue and developmental activities becomes increasingly complex. Amid the array of cash crops, oil palm plantations emerge as particularly impactful on tropical rainforest biodiversity, amplifying environmental concerns.

Nigeria was once the world’s largest producer of palm oil but is today a net importer, relying on production in Malaysia and other countries in Asia. In order to improve self-sufficiency and export revenue, the Nigerian Government announced an investment programme aimed at doubling the palm oil estate in Nigeria to six million hectares. Concerns about the impacts on remaining populations of Grey Parrots prompted the World Parrot Trust (WPT) to initiate a project to understand the relationship between Grey Parrots and commercial oil palm plantations, and how negative impacts of expansion can be minimised or eliminated. The fruit of oil palms is a common food source for Grey Parrots and the range of both species in Africa broadly overlap.

Moreover, our previous research in Nigeria had revealed that Grey Parrots were a common sight in some oil palm plantations, and a study by Sascha Dueker (now WPT’s Lovebird Conservation Coordinator) reported higher encounter rates in oil palm plantations compared with forest and farm habitats. This led to the question: could well-managed oil palm plantations actually offer something of value to Grey Parrots?

In 2022, I was fortunate to receive a Team award from the Conservation Leadership Programme to spearhead a project titled “Reconciling the expansion of oil palm plantations and the conservation of Endangered Grey Parrots.” The aim was to understand how Grey Parrots use oil palm plantations, determine the degree of conflict between areas most suitable for oil palm production and those most important for parrots, and to work with stakeholders to develop a blueprint for the optimal management and design of oil palm plantations. This initiative represents a crucial step towards aligning economic development with environmental conservation, emphasising the importance of sustainable practices for the well-being of both ecosystems and endangered species.

### Our approach

We set out to monitor Grey Parrot behaviour through the year across plantations and adjoining forest areas within the birds’ range in Nigeria. We aimed to understand how they use plantations by monitoring behaviours like feeding, roosting and nesting, and by determining the frequency and specific areas where these activities occurred.

To complement our observations, we conducted interviews with plantation field workers to gather their knowledge of parrot activities in the area. Additionally, we engaged in discussions with plantation managers to understand their perspectives regarding the conservation of parrot resources within plantations and existing management practices such as sustainability policies. We also held several meetings with government officials to grasp the intricacies of the oil palm concession certification process in Nigeria. Leveraging the data collected on Grey Parrot occurrences, we developed a habitat suitability model to intricately map the areas most suitable for parrots and contrast it with those most suitable for oil palm production.

### What we found

Despite reports indicating that Grey Parrots are known to feed on oil palm fruit within plantations, we were surprised to find that this occurred infrequently and was only observed on three occasions across 395 hours of surveys. The reasons why this behaviour was seen and reported by plantation workers so rarely remain unclear. Could it be related to differences between the commercial cultivars of oil palm and wild-type palm fruit? Cultivated palms are much shorter, packed into a dense canopy, and have softer fruit with a higher oil content.

Most Grey Parrots seen within plantations were using the patches of natural forest protected as high conservation value areas in the estate, or flying over it. It seems the plantations themselves provide few resources for the parrots. The significance of these designated forest patches was apparent, as they provide the parrots with essential provisions such as nesting sites and a diverse range of food sources. Incorporating such patches into plantation design, particularly if they contain nest sites and important food trees is clearly important for the sustainability of Grey Parrot populations and biodiversity at large.

Our surveys revealed that one of the plantations close to Okomu National Park hosts a significant Grey Parrot population at night, providing a secured roosting site for parrots returning from forested areas nearby. This roost, which on one visit during the dry season was found to host several hundreds of parrots, is the largest known roost in Nigeria. Our previous research revealed that other large roosting sites for Grey Parrots in Nigeria have been lost to heavy trapping and habitat loss. The persistence of this roost within the plantation suggests that this palm grove has inadvertently acted as a sanctuary, providing security for parrots otherwise vulnerable to trapping. This prompts questions about the interconnected relationship between plantations, natural forest ecosystems and Grey Parrot conservation.

Despite not replicating the parrots’ natural habitat, plantations may in some instances indirectly safeguard the species by providing secure roosting, nesting and foraging sites, acting as a buffer against threats like trapping. The survey unveiled that understanding this “imperfect fortress” is important for devising conservation strategies integrating both plantation and natural habitats to protect Grey Parrots.

Oil Palm Plantation © s1pu9945, Getty Images



**Above:** Okomu National Park, next to one of the one of the plantations, where the team conducted surveys

The managers of the Okomu oil palm plantation have now designated the roost site as a “High Conservation Value” area and have implemented protocols to prevent the disturbance of roosting parrots.

The design and management of commercial oil palm landscapes, and activities at the adjoining areas, significantly impact populations of Grey Parrots. Adhering to sustainability guidelines in the design of plantations, such as identifying and protecting parrot resources within plantations, minimises negative impacts on parrots and fosters resilient habitats. Also, eliminating threats such as illegal trapping and habitat destruction within the plantation and surrounding areas enhances the potential for Grey Parrots to thrive.

Mapping of the areas suitable for Grey Parrots together with those suitable for oil palm cultivation revealed a significant

overlap between the two, with the areas most suitable for oil palm cultivation also being the areas most important for parrots. The degree of overlap was most acute in Cross River State, which has been earmarked for the expansion of oil palm production, but currently lacks the planning systems that have been put in place within other Nigerian states. This overlap highlights a crucial concern: the expansion of oil palm plantations without due recognition of the imperative to conserve biodiversity within these areas will inevitably result in detrimental consequences for Grey Parrots and the broader wildlife community.

In Nigeria, the certification and management of oil palm plantations lacks a dedicated governmental or non-governmental agency. However, the signing of the Africa Sustainable Commodities Initiative (ASCI) by Nigeria

presents a possible springboard for developing national approaches for sustainable agro-commodity management and development.

### Next steps and aims for the future

In August 2023, a collaborative workshop involving multiple stakeholders was convened to share the findings of our research and to gather insights on the pursuit of sustainable oil palm plantations. The timing of this workshop was particularly significant, as it coincided with Nigeria’s recent commitment to the Africa Sustainable Commodities Initiative (ASCI) at CoP 28. Discussions held during the workshop were centred on the implications of the research findings and opportunities related to ASCI implementation.

It is important to recognise that Edo State, in the south of Nigeria, has made commendable

**Upper right:** Dr Chike Ebido speaks with a plantation worker at Ologbo Estate Presco PLC

**Middle right:** Mr Chinemerem Orakwelu interviews a plantation worker at Ologbo Estate Presco PLC

**Lower right:** Team leader Ifeanyi Ezenwa discusses plantation concession processes with members of the Edo State Oil Palm Programme Independent Implementation Office



progress in implementing ASCI, having already established guidelines for realising the Marrakesh Declaration\* on sustainable palm oil production. This includes a geographic information system, or GIS, delineating areas for investment, compulsory afforestation of degraded areas by the investor and mandatory certification for plantations operating within its administrative boundaries with the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO). Recognising these advances, there is an imperative for other states to embrace ASCI implementation. Building upon this recognition, we are working to further a knowledge exchange between states, aiming to expand and advance the adoption of best practices.

Initiatives have been launched to raise awareness of the needs for careful planning, and there is an ongoing effort to share the results of this work to relevant regional and international bodies, including the RSPO and ASCI, to ensure lessons learned can be integrated into coordinated initiatives. This collective approach seeks to foster sustainability in oil palm cultivation and promote the adoption of responsible practices on a broader scale. 📍

\* In November 2016 at the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), a group of African palm oil producers signed the Marrakesh Declaration for the Sustainable Development of the Oil Palm Sector in Africa, emphasising sustainability, human rights and the prudent stewardship of natural resources.

# Building Capacity to Disrupt Illegal Trade

BY IFEANYI EZENWA AND ROWAN MARTIN

Nigeria is a home to rich variety of wildlife species, yet it sadly functions as a significant hub in their trade. In recent years, Nigeria has become a prominent participant in the global illegal wildlife trade, serving as an important source, destination and transit point. The World Wildlife Seizures database highlights that, over the past decade, the country has consistently held a position among the top five countries globally in both source and destination categories for seized shipments.

Despite the intricate nature of this situation, there is a concerted effort among various organisations to disrupt the wildlife trade in Nigeria. In 2022 the government of Nigeria published a new National Strategy to Combat Wildlife and Forest Crime – an important step forwards, opening the door to much needed actions.

Research conducted as part of Ifeanyi's Doctoral studies at the University of Nigeria Nsukka revealed the commodity chains for Grey Parrots (*Psittacus erithacus*) in Nigeria, showing connections with neighbouring countries as both sources and destinations for parrots. It also revealed widespread trapping of Grey Parrots in much of their range in southern Nigeria. Concerningly, areas where trapping took place at the highest intensity were also those where populations were found to be declining most rapidly.

A workshop, convened by the WPT with the support of the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund, brought together law enforcement agencies and organisations in Nigeria and Cameroon, and highlighted the scale of parrot trafficking and the actions needed to bring this under control.

Newly forged partnerships, with specialist organisations working alongside law enforcement, have ensured that information gathered through WPT-led investigations into international trafficking networks can be acted upon.

Since August 2022, there have been at least seven seizures of illegally trafficked parrots in Nigeria

involving over 170 African Grey Parrots as well as many Senegal Parrots (*Poicephalus senegalus*), Ringneck Parakeets (*Alexandrinus krameri*) and some exotic species, including macaws. These seizures made by the Nigerian Customs Services and the National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency (NESREA) have received widespread publicity. However, these successes have created new challenges in ensuring these parrots can be well cared-for and, where possible, returned to the wild to bolster dwindling populations. Typically, seized Grey Parrots need several months of rehabilitation to regrow flight feathers cut by traffickers to prevent them flying away. Experiences with previously seized groups affirmed the need for the development of capacity to ensure that parrots can be rehabilitated and reintroduced responsibly.

Establishing the means to efficiently and humanely manage parrots seized from trade is a vital part of law enforcement initiatives. In December 2022, the WPT met with and visited various government agencies, quarantine facilities and wildlife rescue centres in Abuja, Lagos and Calabar (including Greenfingers Wildlife Conservation Initiative and Pandrillus) to assess how the WPT could help. In November 2023, a coordinated effort by the

WPT, Greenfingers, Pandrillus, Focused Conservation and Nigerian Conservation Foundation, the Nigeria National Park Services and Nigeria Customs Service saw the transfer of parrots from five different seizures to a purpose-built quarantine facility at the Pandrillus headquarters in Calabar. The operation, which took close to 24 hours, involved the transfer of parrots in Lagos and Edo state over several hundreds of kilometres to a purpose-built facility. We are hugely grateful to the hard work of Mr Isaac Ityen of Greenfingers for ensuring that all the parrots arrived safely in Calabar.

Having undergone a quarantine period in Calabar, the parrots will soon be transferred to a large flight aviary at Drill Ranch Afi Mountain, where they can undergo the final stages of their rehabilitation and many of them released to the wild. Construction of the new quarantine and flight aviaries was provided by the World Parrot Trust. We hope that this endeavour, and the newly formed relationships, are a foundation for future efforts, with collaboration and partnership at their core.

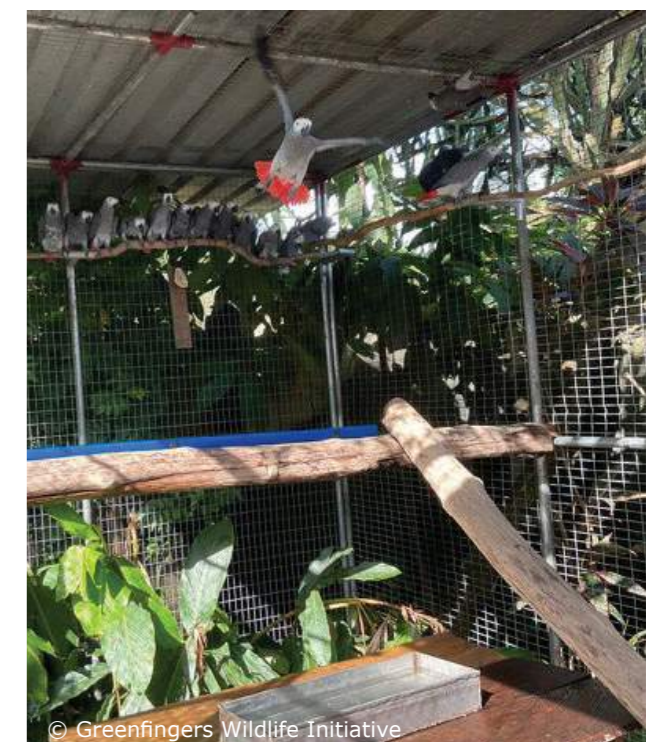
We are currently developing two new projects as part of the WPT's multi-faceted approach to ending the illegal trade of parrots in Nigeria. The first is a community-based initiative aimed at supporting local communities to protect parrots and their nesting trees from illegal trapping and logging activity. The second involves promoting behaviour change among traders of parrot parts used in traditional medicine and belief-based use through enlisting the support of influential individuals they respect.

Through this holistic approach, we hope to give Nigeria's Grey Parrots, and the habitat on which they depend, the space to once again flourish in the wild. 📍



Top: Grey Parrots in the custody of Okomu National Park were transferred to Pandrillus with the support of Greenfingers Wildlife Initiative, Focused Conservation and the World Parrot Trust

Bottom: A newly built quarantine aviary at Pandrillus Calabar, Nigeria





A man with a backpack is walking away from the camera on a dirt path through a lush, green forest. The sun is setting in the background, creating a warm, golden glow. The path is surrounded by dense vegetation, including banana trees and various shrubs. The overall scene is peaceful and natural.

## interview

*Nick Byaba is a naturalist working with In the Shadow of Chimpanzees NGO, based at Sunbird Hill Nature Monitoring and Rewilding Site, on the edge of Kibale National Park. He shares his passion for parrots and all nature with local children through Village Bird Clubs. We had a chance to interview Nick about his experiences as part of a team monitoring Grey Parrots as part of Kasuku Conservation Network.*

## Local Love for the Kasukus of Kibale: A Naturalist's Experience

**Q How did you first become interested in parrots (or wildlife and birds)?**

My journey started as a child when me and my sister used to go to Bigodi Wetlands to fetch firewood, and parrots were in a big tree making a lot of noise. We knew them as "Kasuku." Our parents used to tell us that when you talk a lot then you end up telling lies. So Kasuku means both 'talkative' and 'liar' in our local language! As kids we would start mimicking their voice and they would reply after us, which we loved.

Then when I was about 8 years old, my dad took me and my elder sister to a little lodge the other side of the forest. The owner was one of our clan members, an Omunyonza. This old lady called Switzee had a Grey Parrot in a little cage. I remember so well peeking through the window to look at it, and the parrot was being very noisy and the colour of the tail caught my eyes. I loved watching this parrot because it was so noisy and talkative.

Recently I met the man who sold the parrot to Switzee, as he lives close to Kibale forest. Siviliano was a local poacher focusing on buffalo to sell locally as bush meat. He had a tree in his compound that had a parrot nesting in it. He had heard of people keeping parrots as pets. Siviliano told me how he climbed the tree and carefully picked out a chick from a hole. He sold the parrot for 6,000 Ugandan Shillings, which was much money then and on his way home bought sugar and soap and a smart shirt for himself.

After reaching home, he saw the mother kept coming back to her nest and calling a lot. As a father, he felt sorry that the mother was looking for her chick. He told me he felt bad and up to now, he has never done it again. Siviliano is now a reformed poacher and his daughter is training in tourism in Bigodi. He leads an ex-poachers group in his village and is part of our Kasuku Conservation Network (KCN). He regularly gives me updates on the number of parrots he sees fly over.

© Nick Byaba

## Q How did you start monitoring the parrots?

Since I was young I loved wildlife. So, when I finished school, I decided to join tourism by first training at Kibale Association for Rural and Environmental Development (KAFRED). Then, I joined the first Village Bird Club as a mentor who gets the village kids out in nature every Sunday morning. I then officially joined the Sunbird Hill Team, which monitors birds and butterflies and runs the Village Bird Clubs.

Around June 2019, I went with the kids from the Village Bird Club to greet a specialist tourist group who were travelling around Uganda to observe Grey Parrots and were staying at Switzee's lodge. I shared with the tourist group what Village Bird Clubs do and they had many questions, like if we had seen parrots with rings in our area. Rowan from the World Parrot Trust explained about a group of parrots that had been released in the area in 2011 and asked if we could record whenever we saw these ringed parrots.

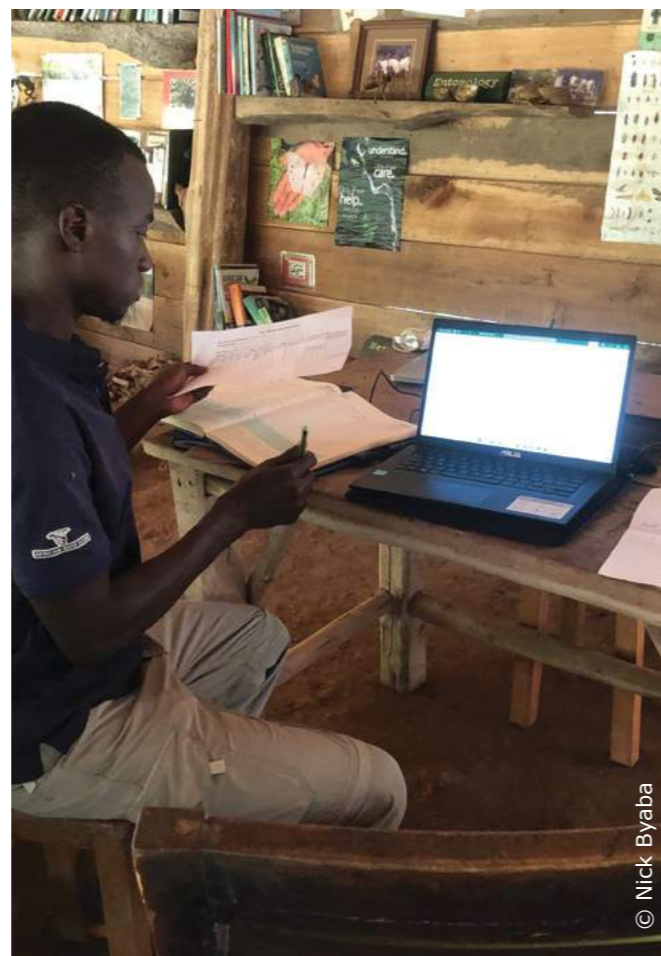
From that day of meeting the parrot people, we all started noticing the number of parrots flying over. During the Covid lockdowns, I started getting to know the parrots, recording the number seen and what they were feeding on. Then Kathleen Cooke, a US parrot enthusiast and activist that I had met in 2019, came back out to Uganda and we spent some weeks looking for parrots together and filming them. Kathleen sent out a camera for me to use to take videos and photos of parrots. Through this I started getting to know the behaviours of the parrots by playing back the videos with friends who also love birds.

In 2023, we formed the Kasuku Conservation Network to help monitor the parrots. KCN is a collaboration with KAFRED, In the Shadow of Chimpanzees and the World Parrot Trust and works closely in partnership with Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA). WPT provided funding and technical support to begin systematic monitoring of the parrots and mapping their feeding trees and flyways— activities which are part of the 2015-2025 National Park management plan, but were yet to be implemented. We now have the equipment and knowledge to keep collecting data on the parrots into the future.

The monitoring was established in advance of the release of a group of around 50 parrots last year. We were able to participate in the release alongside UWA and Uganda Wildlife Conservation Education Centre (UWEC) and have been monitoring these newly released parrots as they move around the area.



© Nick Byaba



© Nick Byaba

## Q What is being done to protect parrots in Kibale Forest?

We live in a very special area here on the edge of Kibale National Park where the parrots live. One of the main threats to the parrots is cutting of trees for firewood, to make charcoal, and clearance to create agricultural land. Parrots rely on these trees for feeding, roosting and sometimes nesting and often come out of the park where these trees are less well-protected. Many of their favourite feeding trees have gone. I have talked to many of the farmers and have had some success with stopping them cutting down trees important for the parrots. In 2022, I formed a group called Parrot Tree Caretakers Association that unites local farmers to protect trees that parrots feed on. I regularly visit each home and discuss parrots with them and we now have 16 members protecting 28 oil palm trees and many other tree species that parrots love. I have also given them tree seedlings to plant on their land.

The Kasuku Conservation Network is an enthusiastic and strong network of many people in our area, not just our small monitoring team. We are in regular contact with farmers, lodge staff, and National Park staff who let me know whenever they see parrots and inform me of their activities. Everyone seems to love reporting seeing Kasuku; I think people are proud of their heritage. Our Sunbird Hill Team now run Village Bird Clubs in five villages in our area. This gives us a great chance to teach the children about parrots, why they need to be protected and explain the laws that protect wildlife and penalties for those who break them. The kids take this information to their families and through the villages. The kids also eagerly tell us when they see or hear of something bad happening, creating another strong network of people that care.



© Rowan Martin

## Q Why is being part of Village Bird Clubs important to you?

We are sharing more knowledge with the next generation, spreading important conservation messages. We have been able to involve the children in the monitoring, for example, on World Parrot Day, and they can all now identify the parrots and mimic their calls. They also report to us when they have seen parrots. They love watching videos I have taken of different parrots' behaviour. Some children have requested us to provide them with tree seedlings for planting for parrots in their homes.

## Q Tell us about some of your favourite observations of parrots.

There are many fascinating things I have seen parrots do. One time, I watched a parrot mimic an African Wood Owl to keep away other birds from their food. Another time I saw parrots barrel-roll; two parrots were flying in a line, one took the lead then rolled, and then the other followed. I have seen this happen again since. I am still wondering why they do this, is it over-excitement?

## Q What are your hopes for the future?

We have planted about three acres of trees as a future food source for the parrots at Sunbird Hill. I would like to see planted corridors connecting to the parrot feeding sites. My dad is known as Prunus, because he has many tree nurseries with only indigenous trees and often hands out *Prunus africana*, which people particularly like for medicinal use. He is teaching me now to successfully raise trees that parrots love and I would love to start up my own nursery for the trees parrots most need and to replant areas of forest.

There is a strong love for wildlife in general and parrots in particular in this region, and a strong network of wildlife guardians. This gives me hope. To secure the future of parrots we need the collaboration of all stakeholders with different skills and passions. I hope to see numbers of Grey Parrots increasing and see parrot conservation plans that will allow tourists to experience parrots in a controlled way, which would raise funding to support parrot conservation and the local community. 📍

# Congo's first centre dedicated to the rehabilitation and release of confiscated parrots

How can returning birds to the wild contribute to ending the unsustainable trade of DRC's Grey Parrots?

BY JOHN AND TERESE HART, LUKURU FOUNDATION  
PROJECT TO PROTECT PARROTS IN MANIEMA, KINDU DRC



**I**t started in late August 2022, with 40 live parrots crammed into a makeshift palm-slat crate and brought to Terese's office door at the Congolese National Park institute's (ICCN) Headquarters in Kindu. As head warden of the Lomami National Park, and ICCN Provincial Director, Terese was responsible for both *in-situ* and *ex-situ* protection of Congo's endangered fauna in Maniema Province.

These parrots had been confiscated by a government inspector near Bikenge, nearly 300 km away and carried on the back of a motorcycle for two days over nearly nonexistent roads to Kindu. They were now her charges. Faced by the visibly stressed and dehydrated birds, we scrambled to quickly repair several abandoned holding cages in the tiny fenced back yard of the ICCN headquarters in Kindu so we could transfer the birds out of their crowded and soiled traveling cage. But this was clearly only a temporary solution. Kindu is a

growing city of nearly 200,000. While wild parrots still occasionally fly over the city, historically known for its vast flocks, it is now no place to undertake the care, rehabilitation and ultimately release of confiscated birds. A more ecologically appropriate and parrot-friendly solution was needed.

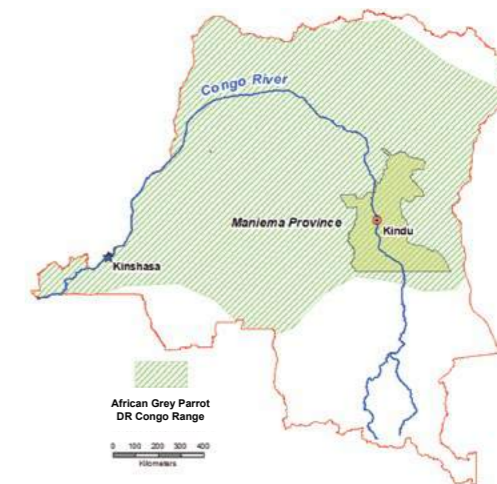
The best option was to relocate the confiscated birds to an ICCN station near Dingi, a small town 55 km north of Kindu, and rehabilitate and release the birds there. The Dingi area is ideal parrot habitat:

a lightly settled mosaic of small villages surrounded by gardens and set in a larger matrix of regenerating vegetation, clearings and islands of forest with abundant scattered oil palms, a favoured parrot food.

Nearby is the Kasuku river, whose name is Swahili for Grey Parrot, and that is bordered by seasonally flooded forest still a favoured flyway of free-ranging birds. Dingi station is easily accessed by dugout from Kindu, down the Congo River to the port of Lokando and from there overland 8 km to the Station.



**FIG 1.** Democratic Republic of Congo contains over half the current range of Grey Parrots. Bringing an end to uncontrolled and unsustainable trade in Grey Parrots in Congo will have a significant impact on the future of the species globally.



**FIG 2.** Maniema Province in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo harbours some of Congo's most important Grey Parrot concentrations, nearly all of which are currently threatened by trapping of adults and collecting of nestlings for illegal international trade. Kindu, Maniema's capital city on the upper Congo River, was renowned for its historically large flocks of parrots occurring in its vicinity, of which only remnants remain today.



**Top:** Climbing to take nestlings  
**Inset:** A trapper with his decoy parrot



Not least in importance was support for the Dingi parrot project by the Maniema Provincial administration. In 2016, a message signed by the then-governor outlawed undocumented parrot trade in the province and authorised confiscations. But the province lacked a facility to rehabilitate confiscated birds, and these were transferred to a sanctuary for confiscated and orphaned primates located at Lwiro in the Kivu highlands. This was not a desired outcome; Lwiro was only marginal parrot habitat and an additional stressful trip for the parrots. Maniema's current governor personally confirmed his support for the parrot project and renewed the earlier 2016 mandate for confiscations with an official message in 2023.

The Centre de Conservation des Perroquets, or CCP, was officially mandated in September 2022. The World Parrot Trust and Lukuru Foundation provided support to complete construction of two 8-metre flight cages and several 2-metre holding cages.

In November, accompanied by two ICCN staff trained as bird keepers, 63 Grey Parrots (the original number now enlarged by several additional confiscations), were loaded into a dugout for the maiden trip to Lokando and over land to Dingi.

Since its establishment in 2022 through 2023, CCP has received over 300 Grey Parrots and 50 Red-fronted Parrots from 14 confiscations and two voluntary submissions of birds. Many birds arrive with clipped or braided primary feathers and plucked tail feathers (the latter are sold to buyers to be incorporated into hats, crowns and other wearable accessories conveying traditional status). Parrots with clipped wing feathers require 6 months or more in rehabilitation to grow in new feathers and regain capacity to fly.

The extended care of parrots in the CCP has given us many moments of delight, punctuated by periods of concern as birds go sick or fail to thrive. The Grey Parrots show an amazing range of personalities

and behaviour. Some of the most challenging, and at the same time most appealing, are the birds that are already habituated, even imprinted, to humans at the time we received them. Termed *Nganga*, or sorcerers, we learned that they had likely been “working birds”, live decoys, that trappers tethered in the crowns of trees where they lured in free-flying birds passing overhead. The arriving parrots touched thin wands covered with plant resin placed near inviting perches in the tree. Their wings fouled, they fell to the ground where they were picked up and put into cages.

Several of the *Nganga* are talkers. One learned to imitate the crowing of a local cock that occasionally strayed into the parrot centre. This *Nganga* appeared to take delight in imitating first the cock then a hen and sending the confused rooster into a frantic search looking for an imagined rival or potential mate. We use *Nganga* as working birds ourselves, perching them on the open windows of the flight cages during releases to lead

**Top:** Trappers force-feeding nestlings at site where they are taken

**Middle and Bottom:** Birds arrive to the centre with clipped or braided primary feathers



birds to venture out. It is clear that some of the *Nganga*, who roam around the centre unimpeded, will choose to not fly free themselves. We are already planning for their long-term care at Dingi. We have made it clear that the centre will not accept pet parrots or decoy birds, all candidate *Nganga*. But some continue to slip through our initial screening. Their presence reminds us how complex human-parrot relationships can become, even in the face of a dangerously exploitative trade.

To date, 89 birds have been returned to the wild from the CCP, most by planned releases. There were some “self-releases”, birds that cut their way out of the flight cages with their beaks and flew strongly. Planned releases are conducted over three or four days with windows in the flight cages opened during daylight hours and monitored to document the departure of parrots. We see the released birds frequently over the course of a couple of weeks, flying over the center where they exchange calls with the captives still there. Small groups of free-flying birds thought to be releases are also reported to us by neighbouring villagers.

We know some of the CCP birds by specific behaviours they acquired in the flight cages and still exhibited after their release. One bird hung upside down from tree branches, in the same way birds like to hang upside down from the mesh in the cage.

The released birds almost never stop to sample the food we leave for them in feeders on the top of the flight cages. By three weeks, passing birds become progressively less frequent and we are left with the hope that they have successfully re-established as free ranging parrots.

While there is satisfaction in seeing illegally captured birds successfully return to the wild, we are under no illusions that confiscations alone can bring an end to Congo's illegal trade.





TL2 staff tending to rescued chicks

The scale is vast, as we learned by monitoring shipments of air freight companies in Kisangani, a major shipping point for parrots captured in eastern Congo, including Maniema. Over the past eight years, tens of thousands of Grey Parrots have been shipped from Maniema Province via Kisangani to Kinshasa for export. Of even greater concern is the knowledge we gained from monitoring trappers and traders that 70 percent of birds on average perish along the trade chain from capture to export. For every bird shipped to Kinshasa and exported, two or three others have been removed from the wild but died in early transfers. The documented number of birds shipped seriously underestimates the impact on wild populations. It is clear that the current trade is completely unsustainable.


For the trappers and traders, parrot mortality is a given condition of the business. Confiscations, especially at the beginning of the capture or the first steps of the trade chain, are treated by traders and trappers as expected losses, just like mortality. There is very little investment in the care of these birds and the trappers'

response to confiscations is simply to return to the forest and look for more to capture. Where confiscations matter is higher up the chain. But here there is risk of threats and push back from traders who have invested in consolidating large numbers of birds, and who readily attempt to corrupt wildlife authorities to recover birds that are confiscated.

Congo alone cannot resolve the unsustainable exploitation of its parrots. There must be reduction in the international demand for these birds. Importing countries must ensure that shipments of illegal Congolese parrots are no longer permitted to cross their borders. This is a global problem, even if Congo leads the way.

The project that has grown up around the CCP is working to ensure total protection for parrots at a national scale where its statute is still ambiguous due to contradictory legislation. In DRC, our goal is to end the parrot trafficking. This will require political will and strengthened capacity to enforce the laws. Confiscations will remain important particularly from higher levels in the trade chain.

Rehabilitation and release of confiscated birds provides visible and concrete evidence in support of our goal. Provincial authorities attend the releases at CCP. Media coverage of the events provides an opportunity to communicate the urgency of bringing an end to the trade. This message must reach communities that harbour parrot trappers and to government administrators that need to strengthen controls.

We are always pleased to see rescued parrots fly free. We hope that in their return to the wild they are ambassadors for a secure future for all wild parrots and inspire the global commitment needed to keep these iconic birds in the skies and forests in Congo. 

For further reading please see: **Grey Parrots Fly Free: Patience pays off in the Congo**, (*PsittaScene Summer 2021*, pages 5-9) and **Congo Journey, Working together to give Grey Parrots a second chance in the DRC** (*PsittaScene Winter 2021*, pages 8-9).

Further information and updates on the **Project to Protect Parrots in Maniema**, including the work of Dingi Parrot Conservation Centre, can be found at [bonoboincongo.com](http://bonoboincongo.com).

## WINGS OF HARMONY: The enduring bond between villagers and Timneh Parrots in Liberia

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**T**imneh Parrots are revered for their remarkable intelligence and have long been coveted in the pet trade, which poses a significant threat to their populations. While the interaction of these parrots with pet owners is familiar to many, their dynamics with humans in the wild remains largely undocumented.


Supported by the WPT-Natural Encounters Conservation Fund, our team set out to understand the relationship between local villagers and a roosting population of Timneh Parrots (*Psittacus timneh*) in a remote village (referred to hereafter as K-Town) in southeastern Liberia. Over the span of a year, (March 2022 – May 2023) our team conducted field surveys and engaged with the local community to understand how this sizable roosting population has survived and what the future may hold.

The findings of the study unveil a mesmerising interaction between people and parrots. While large roosts of Timneh and African Grey Parrots have all but disappeared in many parts of their ranges, here in K-Town,

parrots have coexisted harmoniously with residents since the village was first established over five decades ago. Conversations with villagers revealed a deeply ingrained tradition involving a strong attachment to the parrots, which are held in high regard. The imperative to protect the roosting parrots has been passed down from one generation to the next. In doing so, the inhabitants of K-Town provide a safe haven for their avian companions.

A testament to the apparent safety felt by the parrots is observed in their choice of roosting sites, as they select palm trees in the village in a manner reminiscent of village weavers. This is a highly unusual behaviour for Timneh Parrots, which have been commonly targeted by trappers for the pet trade. The villagers enforce strict protection measures for the parrots, prohibiting any form of hunting and safeguarding the “symbiotic”<sup>\*</sup> relationship. Throughout their coexistence, the parrots have assumed the role of natural alarm clocks for the town, marking the onset of each day with their characteristic squawks. Their evening roosting at 6:30 PM and subsequent departure at 5:00 AM serve as reliable timekeepers, ingrained in the fabric of daily life for every resident of the village. Moreover, the villagers

recount numerous instances where the parrots acted as early warning systems, alerting them to impending danger. During the tumultuous era of the 1990s Liberian Civil War, the keen instincts of the parrots proved invaluable. Sensing the threat of rebel attacks on the village, the parrots would depart days in advance—an instinctual cue that prompted the villagers to evacuate, thus sparing them from the ravages of conflict. The birds’ role as sentinels during this troubling time appears to have cemented the relationship.

The enduring bond between the residents of K-Town and the Timneh Parrots is a captivating tale of coexistence and respect—a narrative that transcends generations and underscores the profound connection between humans and the natural world. This remarkable conservation story serves as an inspiring testament to the resilience of ecosystems when nurtured with care and reverence and a reminder that despite the myriad threats to Timneh Parrots there is every reason for hope. 

<sup>\*</sup>A close and long-term biological interaction between two organisms of different species

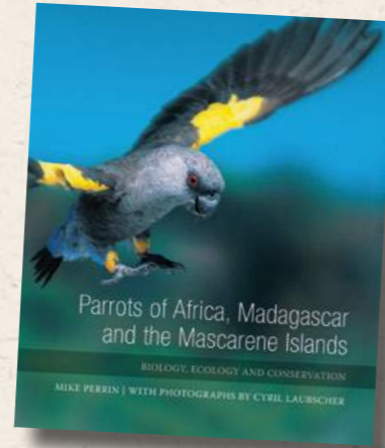
Trailblazing Parrot Researcher Passes



The World Parrot Trust was saddened to learn that Professor Mike Perrin, a pioneer of research on African parrots, passed away in late December 2023. Mike led and founded the Research Centre for African Parrot Conservation at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and helped establish field projects on a range of species, including Cape, Ruppell's, Brown-necked, Grey-headed, Meyers, African Grey parrots and Black-cheeked lovebirds. For many of these parrots, this was the first time that aspects of their ecology had ever been systematically studied in the wild. The many theses, reports and publications that arose from this body of work remain the foundation of much of what we know of those parrots today.

The World Parrot Summit in 1995 sparked a friendship between Mike and the World Parrot Trust's director and founder Mike Reynolds. Mike Perrin was welcomed to Paradise Park on multiple occasions, including for WPT's 20th anniversary celebrations. Among his many contributions to parrot conservation Mike played a central role in the development of the 2000 IUCN Parrot Action Plan, helping coordinate the section on African parrots.

In his retirement Mike penned the definitive book on the Parrots of Africa, Madagascar and the Mascarene islands. Even as his health faltered, Mike maintained a keen interest in parrot conservation and, in 2023, co-authored a review of the research and conservation priorities for the African lovebirds. He leaves an important legacy, not least in the students, researchers and conservationists he inspired to study and protect some very special birds.



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We are thrilled to announce the launch of our new online store! This new platform is designed to enhance your experience with us, offering an array of parrot-themed merchandise and unique ways to support parrot conservation.

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\*Offer in effect until July 1, 2024

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## PARROTS IN THE WILD:

### Timneh Parrot

(*Psittacus timneh*)

Smaller and darker in colour than their Grey Parrot (*Psittacus erithacus*) cousins, Timneh Parrots are subjected to heavy trapping across their West Africa range. Their futures are highly dependent on collaborative conservation actions.

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