

2009-2019

FlyFree



# TO STOP THE WILD PARROT TRADE

## A Decade of WPT's *FlyFree* Program

by Charlotte Foxhall

There's usually some discussion amongst the birds, but right now they're silent: they see that the release aviary door is open. They hesitate, and then a few brave souls venture to and then beyond the invisible barrier to experience the first heady and anxious moments of freedom. The rest follow tentatively in small groups, dispersing to the surrounding trees.

This is the hoped-for outcome for rescued parrots, but the future for most caught in the grim world of wildlife trafficking is not so certain.



In Indonesia, smuggled Eclectus parrots await rescue from pipes. © BKSDA Ternate

**A**t the heart of the World Parrot Trust's formation in 1989 was the protection of the most critically endangered of Earth's parrots. Not long after, WPT founder Mike Reynolds grew concerned that wild parrots were being adversely affected by trapping for trade.

Science and decades of work in the field have since confirmed his fears, and more - that the trade in wild-caught parrots is inhumane, at least half of the birds trapped succumb to injury, starvation and disease, and wild populations can be virtually wiped out.

Since the 1970s, the capture of parrots for the pet trade has impacted over 17 million birds. Tens of thousands of parrots are still being captured every year and some of the most heavily trapped species, such as Grey Parrots, have suffered catastrophic population collapses - over 90% in Ghana alone.

## HOW IT WORKS

Increasing the capacity of rescues to receive, rehabilitate and release confiscated animals allows local governments to pursue trappers and confiscate more birds. The *FlyFree* program directly helps rescues and government agencies manage confiscated parrots by providing funding for food, release enclosures, disease screening, bands and tracking equipment, and basic veterinary and bird care training. Meetings with regional and international agencies such as CITES (Convention on International Trade

in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) to advocate for better protections are a necessity to help parrots threatened by trade. On a different front, the WPT works to shut down channels through which illegal trade occurs with outside agencies such as airlines, shipping companies, and social media. And lastly, *FlyFree* actively promotes the circulation of educational materials to local people, to raise awareness and foster concern about the ecologically and culturally important wildlife that they live with.

But that has begun to change: in 2007, after WPT had successfully spearheaded a 7-year effort with over 230 NGOs, the European Union announced a permanent embargo on the import of wild-caught birds. The ban spared the lives of millions of birds each year, but still more was needed: in 2009 WPT launched the *FlyFree* program, an ongoing effort to counter the trapping that still occurs in many countries.

*FlyFree* supports direct action to rescue, rehabilitate and release wild-caught birds, through partnerships with in-country organisations and governments. More rehabilitated birds are being successfully released than ever before thanks to thoughtful and informed choices about where the birds are released, how many birds are in the group, their pre-release training, and careful disease screening for eligible candidates.

## RECENT HIGHLIGHTS

### Africa

African parrots are among the most traded of all species; as a consequence WPT pursues a multi-faceted strategy throughout the region. Studies documenting the impact and nature of trade have been recently completed or are ongoing in multiple countries (including Guinea-Bissau, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria and Sierra Leone). These include the first national status assessment for Timneh Parrots, work which has identified key populations that are now being protected through engagement with local communities and hiring former trappers to protect nests.

Determining the current state of knowledge of a species informs advocacy efforts for improved policy and in 2016, WPT and its partners rallied to provide wild African Grey Parrots (encompassing *Psittacus erithacus* and *Psittacus timneh*) with CITES Appendix I protection from trapping. Ongoing investigations into trafficking enable WPT to monitor the situation, and have driven further CITES decisions to close loopholes and

increase protections for other species; for example, a surge in export permits for Red-fronted Parrots (*Poicephalus guilielmi*) was addressed at a recent CITES meeting, and improvements to legislation in several range states have since been made. Working with various partners, WPT has also been able to convince airlines to boost protections against trafficking, recently working with Turkish Airlines to finalise an embargo on transporting African Greys, and improve training in vulnerable trafficking sites.

Rehabilitation and release aviaries for parrots rescued from trade have been built in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Senegal, Guinea and additional support provided in Sierra Leone. Training workshops in best practice protocols for caring for rescued parrots have been delivered in Angola and will soon be replicated in Cameroon. Additionally, ground-breaking research focussing on the spread of Psittacine Beak and Feather Disease (PBFD) virus through legal and illegal trade was completed with multiple partners in Senegal.



In Angola, WPT vet Dr. Davide de Guz provides training in parrot care to local officials © Rowan Martin



In Sierra Leone, new Timneh Parrot surveys give fresh insights into the species' status © Rowan Martin



In Nigeria, researcher Ifeanyi Ezenwa and WPT Africa Programme Director Dr. Rowan Martin discuss sampling methods © WPT



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**FlyFree has been growing since 2009 and supports front-line efforts of dozens of partner agencies in countries around the world, including Angola, Belize, Bolivia, Bonaire, Brazil, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, Guatemala, Honduras, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Liberia, Mexico, Nepal, Peru, Senegal, Sierra Leone and South Africa — all committed to ending the wild bird trade.**  
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## Indonesia

In recent years, WPT has partnered with the Natural Resources Conservation Agency Indonesia (BKSDA) and local biodiversity groups to involve communities living in parrots' ranges with tree planting events, instruction in bird-watching, and gifts of binoculars and books to lead income-producing visitor tours. Chattering Lorries (*Lorius garrulus*), Purple-naped (*L. domicella*), Black-capped (*L. lory*) and Red-and-blue Lorries (*Eos histrio*), White and Moluccan Cockatoos (*Cacatua alba* and *C. moluccensis*), and Eclectus Parrots (*Eclectus roratus*) have regularly been found in trade here, and WPT has been training officials on best practices for their care and rehabilitation, also ensuring that they are returned to their proper islands. In addition, WPT has provided funding for food, medicine and new holding enclosures, and has provided incentives for former trappers to protect nests and patrol areas known to attract poachers.

## Central America

In Central America, WPT has been working closely with in-country partners Echo on Bonaire, Belize Bird Rescue, Macaw Recovery Network and Ara Manzanillo in Costa Rica, and Macaw Mountain Nature Reserve and Bird Park in Honduras, to help manage increasing numbers of surrendered and confiscated birds, with technical and financial support for their rehabilitation and eventual release. Threatened wild parrot populations are also boosted by captive breeding and releasing birds to the wild. Macaw Mountain's successful release of Scarlet Macaws in two locations – mainland Honduras and the Bay Islands off its coast – is an example of this.



In Honduras, successful releases of Scarlet Macaws continue  
© Macaw Mountain

## South America

An intense local trade exists here; confiscated birds can number in the hundreds at a time. To help slow the deluge WPT has partnered with a number of in-country organisations to provide technical help, supplies and funding to improve rehabilitative capacity and release of these confiscated birds. The Blue-fronted Amazon Project, an alliance with a local rescue centre and a Brazilian university wildlife facility, has rehabilitated and released nearly 300 Blue-fronted Amazons (*Amazona aestiva*) back to the wild, with more to follow in coming months. WPT supported Mundo Natural Rescue Center in Peru for the care of over a hundred parrots, all native species, sent to the facility. In Bolivia, WPT supports the Wild Parrot Conservation Center where, in the past year, 450 parrots including Blue-fronted Amazons, Canary-winged Parakeets (*Brotogeris chiriri*), Blue-winged Parrotlets (*Forpus xanthopterygius*), multiple species of conure, and Red-fronted Macaws (*Ara rubrogenys*) were brought to the facility for urgent treatment. Some of these birds are still being cared for, with others having been returned back to the wild.



In Peru, a group of 350 parrots – crowded into wooden fruit boxes – is intercepted by Peruvian authorities. © Rosa Elena Zegarra



In Bolivia, confiscated Canary-winged Parakeets await transportation © CREA

## LOOKING FORWARD

The *FlyFree* movement has proven to be an effective means of responding to the immediate and longer-term needs of parrots intercepted in illegal international trade. The vast majority of international trade has been shut down thanks

to the EU import ban and increasingly, parrot range countries are stepping up with enforcement, rehabilitation, and release with the *FlyFree* program encouraging these kinds of novel and effective efforts to stop trade in wild parrots for good. ☐

### About the Author:

Charlotte Foxhall joined the WPT in 2018 in an administrative and grant writing role. She holds an Honours degree in Environmental Science and is currently undertaking a Master's degree in Conservation Ecology.



Scarlet Macaw © Macaw Mountain