

reflections on: Parrot Rescue and Adoption

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April and I made another journey to our local adoption refuge a while ago. This time it was for the purpose of dropping off two pairs of conures no longer wanted by their keepers (retiring aviculturists.) It was our second such journey in two weeks—the first had been to deliver a twenty-four-year-old male Moluccan Cockatoo and two unhappy Amazon parrots of different species.



EB CRAVENS is a science writer by training; he was for years a regular contributor for AFA's Watchbird Magazine and the Companion Parrot Quarterly. EB currently writes a number of monthly columns; "The Complete Psittacine" in PARROTS Magazine, "The Hookbill Hobbyist" in Australian Birdkeeper, and his monthly series of articles "Birdkeeping Naturally" is sent out to bird clubs and individuals across the United States.

All three [parrots] were given to us to re-home when their owners could no longer care for them because of serious personal health issues. While there, we took our customary tour around the premises to see the most recent arrivals in the 12-meter aviaries and smaller cages and flights up and down the hill.

I will not say it was depressing because there were about as many happy birds and positive rescue stories as there were sad ones and negative 'placements'. What it really was: a healthy dose of *realism*. One thing stands out in my mind however as I compose this writing:

"Every single parrot breeder, hand feeder, pet store worker, aviculturist, and birdkeeper of any sort should be persuaded to make a similar excursion to the avian sanctuary nearest them to see firsthand what is happening at such places..."

The sundry inhabitants of all those wire enclosures in the shelter on our island and in hundreds more sites like it around the U.S. and the

globe, along with all the lamentable accounts of many of these parrots' lives in captivity, are certainly not the *only* outcomes to the process of breeding psittacines for the commercial pet market, but they are unquestionably *one* of the results of some of the avicultural and pet keeping practices that have been going on for decades and continue as we speak.

Wherein Lies Responsibility?

Now as a sometime hobbyist I am not so naïve as to presume to tell aviculturists that they should not be reproducing psittacines in captivity. Others have done that at various times. And scores of conscientious hobbyists and smaller breeders have shrunk their reproduction agendas in recent years.

What is more important, however, is that perhaps if some of those parrot breeders who earn their living selling baby birds would venture to explore personally the avian occupants in psittacine refuges, they would take more seriously the responsibilities they have assumed.

At our visit site, some of the older birds, many elderly former breeder pairs or singles, were obviously alarmed by all humans—this after decades in captivity and usually several different living situations.

But it was the former handfed pets that most evoked melancholy from me.

These parrots were bred to be close companions to people, and it is not unusual for their move to a holding cage in an adoption center to be quite traumatic. For example, Wasu, the cockatoo we dropped off, was one of the most incredible male pet Moluccans I have ever known.

Friendly, social around strangers, tolerant of smaller birds, not excessively loud when given plenty of diversion, he was an integral part of the household life of his original family. But to see his life fractured by being loaded in a carrier and taken to a strange place seemed like such a letdown. We expected him to get quite excited about all the other squawking white cockatoos living at the rescue.

But, Wasu reacted not at all to the noisemaking of his white relatives. He made no effort to communicate with the female cockatoos we showed him. In fact, he was altogether a bit startled by their active demeanors. All he wanted to do was court humans and beg for hands-on attention from his new and doting keepers.

His total lack of social habits towards others of his kind is a stark void—a failure of sorts—for aviculture and the way it chooses to produce numerous pets. The very same behavior attitudes could be seen in some of the Sun Conures, a Patagonian Conure, large macaws, and Eclectus Parrots at this facility.

They begged to humans, even though it was humans who abandoned and gave them up in the first place. Perhaps it is precisely the fact that human owners have forsaken them that makes these psittacines so needy. Yet after years of raising a number of self-reliant, well-



Though once highly valued, Hyacinth Macaws (above) are now among many species given up for adoption.

Many rescued psittacines are feather mutilators: this Eclectus hen (below, right) has since been moved to an aviary with two boys and a play box and she has grown back all her feathers!



behaved baby parrots that know they are parrots and can entertain themselves without constant human input, I can't help but believe that many bird breeders are inadvertently doing the chicks they profess to love a major disservice by fawning over them and frequently cuddling them after taking them away from their parents and siblings so hastily that the future pet has had no family life, no personal *identity*.

What Kind of Parrot Did I Raise?

We all know the importance of proper teaching for the character

development of human children. Well, where are the teachers for our baby hookbills? Obviously in a great deal of pet bird cases, humans are the teachers. But, what are we teaching these birds? ***Don't bite. Don't scream. Step up. Step down. Scratch your head.*** Dozens more psittacine commands exist than have ever been tried on domestic cats! Why is this?

Most of the parrots April and I saw in that adoption center have those orders down pat. Are they happy because of it? Do such rudimentary skills prevent them from being discarded by their original owners?



A surrendered Derbyan pet exults in his new 40-foot planted aviary.



Wouldn't our psittacine chicks be better served learning intricate lessons from their own parents and species, so that they might comprehend a smidgeon of healthy birdlike behavior in a world dominated by people?

After all, many an expert parrot keeper has indicated that some of the best-behaved pets they ever encountered were former wild or parent raised psittacines.

They come to love their humans; they respect humans, but they maintain their "parrotness." But such species-specific teaching takes an out-of-the-ordinary setup, not to mention quite a bit of focused time. And in the commercial breeding establishment time is money, is it not....?

The Dilemma of Retired Breeders

I have always believed firmly in keeping mature parrots in twos whenever it is plausible. That is certainly the best way to "retire" older parrots for the last phase of their captive lives. The problem with this conviction, as revealed at our rescue sanctuary, is that so many pet parrots are dysfunctional to the point that they cannot accept what would be the best thing for them—a birdie friend or companion. Many have absolutely

no idea that another psittacine of their same genus or species is something they should relate to. Often the only preening any of these birds has ever experienced has been done by human fingers—not a very efficient mechanism for grooming and comforting single feather shafts, I can assure you!

If you are taken from the nest or incubator/brooder weeks before your plumage is fully grown, the chances that you will have experienced the joys of being allo-preened by a parent or another bird are oftentimes nil. Yes, now and again, birds spend a relatively short time in clutches with brothers and sisters, but more often pets are sold off early (even unweaned!) or clutches are split up and go to different destinations, etc.

Certainly, few chicks have the opportunity to fledge and wean with members of their family and their own kind. Is it any wonder that their species identity is lost to the degree that they will hardly be able to look upon another like parrot as something to provide reassurance and camaraderie?

Put such birds into a human environment as a single pet for a decade or two and the situation may

become worse. In the past I have written about baby parrot loneliness, I have written of chicks being raised as orphans, but truly, as evidenced at our local rehab center, if there is one rather convoluted rationale of pet birdkeeping in the world these days it is the fixated owner concept that, "My parrot does not think he is a bird."

"My bird thinks he is human," I have heard said on sundry occasions. What a totally mixed up affront to both the pet parrot and to those persons that formerly raised or are presently keeping it. If you have a psittacine such as this currently living in your home, may the gods bless you both—hopefully the beloved pet will never be alone and forced to cope with a crowded rescue/rehab facility.

I honor and befriend those who run these sanctuaries, but I am aghast at the lack of training that went into producing so many of the birds that occupy them. ☐

NEXT ISSUE:

PART 2 - Solutions that Might Benefit the Rescue/Adoption Situation