

Solutions that Might Benefit the Rescue/Adoption Situation

article and photos © EB Cravens

In my article titled “Reflections on Parrot Rescue and Adoption” (Autumn 2017 PsittaScene), I discussed some points concerning my return visit to our small local rescue sanctuary out here on the Big Island Hawaii. I suggested certain characteristics of the psittacines that come to inhabit such facilities and mentioned that persons in the parrot keeping community should take time out to visit such a site to see for themselves all the happiness and sadness intertwined therein.



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.

In the longer term, what is specifically needed is a group of potential solutions in aviculture to alleviate all the negative aspects of re-homing, and to try and help birds and owners alike sustain more permanent relationships in their homes.

Given that there is a significant problem with overcrowding or need for more cages at many parrot adoption and refuge centers, and considering the fact that many of the birds inhabiting such facilities are mentally and/or physically problematic in some ways, what can we as caring birdkeepers do to help alleviate the problem in the years ahead? Certainly any solutions must be both fundamental and cooperative amongst all those birdkeepers involved in this situation.

A Collective Accountability

First of all we in the birdkeeping community need to stop being in denial. Psittacines live such an inordinately long time in relation to their owners and other captive animals that any overview of our aviary flocks must be devised for the very long term.

Everyone who owns parrots, sells parrots, breeds parrots, cares for

parrots, or espouses the beauty and fun of keeping a parrot is in part responsible for the unremitting re-homing of individual psittacines in and outside the marketplace today.

I am partially to ‘blame’ when I write positively about attributes of pet birds. Behavior consultants and veterinarians are accountable when they counsel owners on ways to better train, feed and house birds. Aviculturists and pet stores are answerable when they breed and sell more birds. This situation is a mutual crisis.

Make no mistake, a very moderate percentage of those hookbills entering adoption programs are actually deficient, misbehaved, abused or dysfunctional birds. Most adoptees are simply parrots being parrots—and are given up for convenience reasons (such as noisemaking too loud, or chewing on antique furniture or owners getting old or sick or terminating a marriage or simply having to move to residences far away).

As such, we of the birdkeeping world are *all* a part of the dilemma. Those breeders that insistently claim “*There are no unwanted parrots,*” or those uneducated buyers who purchase a bird, then just as impulsively give

it away after a year or two and turn their backs on the problem are equally at fault. You may only acquire one psittacine in your life, but passing it on to a rescue site does not absolve the reality that the bird was produced with *you in mind*. And most likely another psittacine and then another are now being produced because you paid good money for that first one...

We All Can Solve This

The point is not to level culpability here, but to dole any and all fault out everywhere in small bits. We are seeking to come to some consensus on how to answer this complex predicament.

It is fascinating to me all the “un-homed” psittacines I have taken in over the years (I use the term “un-homed” since not all are actually unwanted or surplus, but are ‘victims’ of changing human lifestyles) whose owners want to set down a list of specific conditions for the bird’s care or long term possession in the years ahead!

Yet, the same previous owners will then go many months, years, decades even without a *single* telephone call to enquire about the health and happiness of the parrot they had so strongly “loved.”

‘Tis quite odd, that.

That is also what I make note of when I caution aviculture and pet buyers not to deny their initial responsibility. Even if breeders or pet stores or individual birdkeepers who have given up parrots, or who take my advice and go visit a sanctuary near themselves, would donate to these retirement facilities some seed or toys, or money or paper towels, volunteer their own time, *anything*—then we all would be further down the road to standing up and coping with un-homed birds.

Additionally, let us look here at the front end of the story. Given that so many parrots are likely going to end up in rescue or rehab places at some phase of their lives, how do we go about adjusting the way we all birth, raise and train psittacines in captivity to:

1. Anticipate and prepare the parrot for a potential episode of dispossession and adoption, and
2. Create a bird with characteristics that logically make it less likely to be given up?

Alas that leads us back to the place from which baby parrots come—the birthplace.

Now if there is one thing that I have learned from my expert avicultural friends and acquaintances down through the past 40 years, it is that those folks birthing and raising baby psittacines do not particularly like being told to change their methods. After all, so many of their charges leave their premises as cuddly, endearing handfed babies.

Many, depending upon the commercial facility and the country of the world, are not even weaned yet; so how could the persons producing these “perfect” little chicks be at all responsible for various behavior problems that occur when the cute little amazon or cockatoo or African grey turns two or three or four years of age?

Yes, of course the breeder establishments are not totally responsible for such outcomes. It is a shared accountability as I have stated. Yet, not to turn away in denial, an aviculturist dealing with handfed neonate and fledgling psittacines must *at the very least* be answerable for the effect upon those psittacines during the days in his or her care—the earliest childhood stages of the baby parrot, so to speak.

And I, as a conscientious and occasional hobby aviculturist for the past 30 years, say that there is oh, so much a breeder and hand feeder can do to help a baby bird evolve into a well-rounded, adaptable, independent adult hookbill with a better than average chance of fulfilling numbers 1) and 2) above.

Some advocates within or without the avian world just claim: “produce fewer parrots.” I admit that this approach

has its upside, as ostensibly fewer raised birds at each facility means more personal time and attention is available for each bird; and of course fewer psittacines out there in the marketplace that perhaps end up in rehab establishments. This also would aid breeders and pet shops by giving them a better chance to carefully screen and select purchasing clients.

With nearly a decade of experience working in retail bird stores, I feel that the tendency to “sell” a potential customer on a new parrot is not necessarily the best way to go about marketing live animals. There are just too many cases of the sales person sending the seven-year-old youth and his mother home with a new wing-clipped budgerigar, two bags of seed mix, and a carry cage.

I do agree that fewer babies in the case of white cockatoos is a good idea! These psittacines prove to be *the most difficult* parrots to properly keep in a home, while at the same time having most traditionally been raised in the U.S. with the emotionally unsophisticated nurturing practices of artificial incubation or early pulling from the parental nest.

It takes a committed and expert owner to provide for a cockatoo for thirty or forty years in a way that keeps it both healthy and happy. If the bird was hand fed and brought up using a method that eliminates any personal ‘childhood’ cockatoo identity, then it becomes nearly impossible to avoid later behavioral pitfalls. I also would concur with breeders that choose to no longer birth and hand raise their large macaws. These birds are so painstakingly slow in their growth towards emotional independence and can manifest dysfunctional conduct months after weaning because of some pet industry practices. It is no wonder that large macaws of all species are the number two given up psittacine in the North American market today. They have an average-homes-per-lifetime statistic of around five—but seven placements is not unusual.

Add to that the fact that some birds have been gathered up and moved three or four times between birthplace and sales outlet and the problem increases even more.

So are There Any Answers?

So what is it we are looking for from the breeders, trainers, bird shops, and early hand feeders? In our aviaries, we seek a mature independence and a *personal parrot identity* for each and every baby bird we raise and sell. That is really straightforward. Retain the parrot extra weeks with its parents and siblings; fledge it and wean it with those of its own kind and other species that are on hand. Give it the time to develop that “birdness”, that strong individuality that it will carry as an insurance policy against neglect the rest of its life.

Do not part with it until it has tens of advanced flying skills—i.e flying in the wind, flying when wet, landing on vertical tree stumps and amidst clusters of bouncy twiggy boughs, etc. etc. Teach it as much as possible about the complex life amongst humans when it is still young, curious, and impressionable. The more it learns under our care, the less that will surprise and fearfully perplex it in its new permanent home.

We should not be turning our backs on our avian young by passing them on to someone else before they have fledged and weaned and acquired these traits—be it to a broker or bird store or another hand feeder. This practice interrupts the learning curve of the parrot at a critical time; and to tell the truth, it appears to me this is an admission that “someone else can handle my bird’s training period better than I can.” Not very high accolade for anyone presuming to be an authoritative aviculturist.

Keep your fledglings longer. It will pay off in better long-term pets, and will eventually lead to your having a waiting list and all birds sold even before they are fully trained by you, as word of your method spreads. If your production scheme is just “raise lots of chicks and hope that they sell,” then you are definitely a greater part of the

un-homing problem, and it is time to rethink your system.

What should we be teaching all our baby parrots?

Life lessons...those schoolings which will stay with them and sustain them if and when an unforeseen dispossession arrives.

Get those fledglings outside where they can learn uncountable things we humans do not even comprehend. Show them wind and rain and trees and crows and airplanes and squirrels and lawn mowers on the move. Socialize them amongst men and women and strangers and other parrots with whom they can interact and gain experience. Emphasize instincts like food choices and ground foraging and bathing and fearful knowledge of big dogs. Leave the human speak to the final buyer, and accentuate species noises like warning calls and bathing squeals and male “don’t do that” growls.

Never, I repeat *never*, let one of your parrots be denied the right to early flight training. This, above all else is something that is a breeder/hand feeder responsibility because if not done at the correct time, it can handicap one of your offspring for a lifetime. Just think how you would feel if a psittacine you produced and raised went into a home before building up a body and a mental capacity to fly precisely, ended up being handicapped because of it, developed bad behavior issues, and then was adopted out to a new keeper who offered a place for that bird to fly around in great expanse. But your early fledging decisions made it a hugely complicated issue to even get the bird doing basic aerial skills.

We always seek to prepare our parrots for a potential un-homing by making each of them as complete a psittacine as we can during the time we are caring for them. Yes, it is great to teach our birds the ‘up’ command and the ‘down’ command and the ‘ow’ command and the ‘quiet’ command, if you can. But these are skills that seek to bring the birds into conformity with what people

want of them. It is just as important to emphasize to bird owners that the more tolerant they become of the *natural* parrot behaviors in their pets, the better the chances that both they and the birds will experience a long, gratifying relationship.

What is the point in trying to teach a Goffin’s Cockatoo not to screech and carry on, or a Military Macaw not to try and gnaw on things in the household, if it leads to years of confrontation and strain in both the parrot and the owner? April and I tend to accept many inconvenient behaviors in our psittacines and then give them an environment where they can channel such individual inclinations. It’s healthier and often proves to be the better option. This is why sales people who take pains to match birdie personalities to new homes end up with so many more satisfied customers, while shops and aviculturists just selling birds out the door are doing so at the expense of their long-term reputation and the continued satisfaction of their bird purchasers.

Leo Tolstoy once proclaimed, “What then must we do?” when confronted with a human predicament. In the end, we as humans only do what we can...and in this case we must be content to do it one parrot at a time.

I believe that when we birth or acquire a parrot, even for only a few months, then in a way we have it for life. We may pass on the daily care and the perceived ‘ownership’ of the bird, but if we try to disavow the impact we have had on that animal’s time on earth, from birth through childhood to adulthood and old age, then we are fooling ourselves. If we claim to be close to our hookbills, but send that closeness off with the parrot to a new home, then we relinquish the one thing of true value that owning the bird brought us to begin with.

The knowledge of how to do right by these intelligent creatures is readily available. We need only apply it industriously and with lasting love to make things brighter and less pessimistic at all of those overburdened rescue facilities around the world. 📄