

Psitta



Scene

The World Parrot Trust

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THE WELFARE OF PET PARROTS

And some 'Guidelines for Parrot Rescue' By Michael Reynolds

ANCIENT HISTORY

Thirty years ago the pets page of a leading UK newspaper wrote a few words about my aim to create a breeding centre for parrots. This brought in 200 letters, some asking for help with their parrots, and a few asking me to take their birds. So I drove all over Britain, visited a variety of pet parrots, and collected eight birds. Two Moluccan Cockatoos (too noisy!), one Umbrella Cockatoo, one Scarlet Macaw, and four assorted Amazon Parrots. Two of these paired up immediately, despite having been kept in solitary confinement for eighteen years and thirteen years respectively. They also defied convention by being different species - a blue-fronted and a yellow-fronted - but at that time neither they nor I knew this was wrong. They hatched two chicks, and a young journalist called Rosemary Low came to see them. But that's another story.

SHOCKING CONDITIONS

The point I wanted to get to is that my visits to about twenty average homes with pet parrots gave me a shock I will never forget. While perhaps half of the birds I saw were kept pretty well, the rest were living in a state of misery. You know what I mean: filthy cages, fed only sunflower seed, never let out of a tiny cage ('he bites'), never sprayed, completely lacking any physical or mental stimulation, and worse. We all know this neglect and ignorance

affects pet parrots, just as it does dogs and cats. The difference seems to be that whereas the dogs and cats are quite well funded and looked after by a variety of societies and shelters, the parrots don't seem to receive the same level of support from the general public.

VETERINARY COMMENTS

I asked our veterinary consultant (and trustee) Andrew Greenwood for some input from the point of view of an avian vet. Here are his comments.

"We certainly see a lot of neglected parrots, suffering physical deprivation from poor diet and lack of exercise and psychological deprivation from too little attention or continuous confinement. Neglect has two origins - genuine ignorance,

which is usually seen in the pet parrot owner and is easily corrected, and stupid carelessness, which is seen in bad aviculturists and is much harder to correct. The second, of course, often leads to the first when a pet owner buys a bird from a breeder or dealer who fails to instruct the new owner in the correct way to care for and manage the bird. Most of the ailments of parrots are attributable to neglect through bad diet, filthy conditions, incorrect pairing, exposure to hazardous materials, and so on. The wanton spreading of contagious disease knowingly between collections, and thence into the pet market, is all too common and leads to tragedy for both birds and owners.

The solution is simple: education,

education, education. We need to educate parrot owners in the use of complete diets, in hygiene and, particularly, in how to train parrots with kindness so that they can safely spend the majority of time out of their cage able to fly. We need to educate breeders that the public do not want or need birds that are fixated on a seed diet, whose wings are already clipped, and who are not properly weaned. Above all, we need to educate both groups that there is absolutely no justification for the importation of wild parrots in mass trade. While this trade continues, people will buy birds which will never make good or happy pets, and breeders will never have an adequate financial incentive to produce the best possible birds." →



NOT A PRETTY SIGHT. This macaw is one of the 'casualties'.

“psittacine
(sit' à sîn) Belonging
or allied to the
parrots; parrot-like”

If we can save the parrots, we may yet save ourselves © WPT



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The World Parrot Trust does not necessarily endorse any views or statements made by contributors to PsittaScene.

It will of course consider articles or letters from any contributors on their merits.

Increasingly, however, many caring members of the 'parrot community' are doing what they can to help the situation. Because the World Parrot Trust has members across the world and communicates with all developed avicultural countries, we know that similar action is being taken everywhere to try to cope with the problem birds - the 'casualties' of our obsession with the parrots. Here is an excerpt from a letter from a WPT member, that strikingly expresses the deep concerns of many who keep and care about parrots:

I do not believe, as sad as it sounds, that realistically parrots and people can continue to coexist on this planet as long as parrot suffering is as commonplace as it is now. Bird Talk (February 1998 issue) printed articles on the subject, bringing attention to the other side of breeding, a first, and I commend them for that. Pretty sugary bird stories are the norm for magazines because it sells and it is pleasant reading.

We can no longer comfortably release parrots into deforested, shrinking rain forests as poachers will run up into trees, grab them up, crate them and cruelly ship them off for export to God knows what kind of conditions all over the world.

As long as parrots are about money, there will be compromise and the parrots will be the losers, no matter how lofty or well-intentioned the organisation, how prominent the collector, how 'caring' the breeder.

Why do we breed them? To preserve the species? For what? To go to more breeders, more pet shops, more collections, homes where the owners cage them all day, usually in too small a cage with the proverbial cup of seed, before they get tired of them and retire them to a dark garage (very common) or sell them to the next 'parrot fancier'. If you doubt this, check the classified section under 'Birds' or the 'Buy, Sell, Trade' in your newspaper bird ads, or attend auctions full of unwanted birds sold with as much compassion as used cars.

We want them to be feathered humans, mimicking our voices. We take all their 'parrotness' out of them when we deprive them of flight and punish them for screaming or biting or making a mess. Probably no other creature is more deprived of the natural elements of his environment than a parrot in captivity.

Parrots should really never have been captive pets! Cockatoos, so



Green-winged Macaws 'Sparky' and 'Inca', pets of Mandy and Graeme Hartley Havers, helped open the 'Rat & Parrot' pub in Leeds, U.K. Our active member Avril Barton arranged this, and earned a £250 donation to the trust.

demanding of constant affection, are extremely stress or change intolerant and therefore are so often plucked and mutilated. Feather plucking and mutilation are conditions virtually unknown in the wild. These are conditions of captivity only.

A well-known US avian veterinarian has said that there are 176,000 unwanted birds, probably a very conservative estimate. Zoos are overwhelmed with offers of parrots whose owners have tired of them or have had a lifestyle change. There is The Parrot Rescue Center in Holland, containing many insane birds. Why are we breeding more?

We need to better care for what we already have; to rehabilitate the worst cases and love more what birds are here now! An average parrot is re-homed 15-20 times in his life. Imagine the stress to each bird at every change. Bird theft, so common nowadays, is unbearably traumatic to them and often so preventable. Large 'free flight' aviaries, properly wired against predators, are probably the only compassionate, logical solution for captive parrots. Cages, no matter what size, are often nothing more than lonely prisons.

I once asked a very good reputable breeder, 'Do you ever worry what happens to your beautiful babies down the road after they are sold?' His response was, 'You can't think of that when you're in the business'.

This to me is unacceptable, at least for the parrots. I guess that's why I'll never sell or make money off the back of a parrot. If I can no longer care for them, I will find them the best home possible but they are never for sale anymore than a child of mine.

Let us never forget the actual quality of life we are giving parrots in the glorious names of 'conservation', 'saving endangered species', etc., all noble phrases. Let us deal with the reality of those already sharing this planet with us now!

I fervently pray for a kinder future for all parrots and especially for enlightenment of the human race in their regard, on whom they depend for everything. We are their captors, we owe them the best of ourselves.

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Here is a response from a UK parrot rescue organisation:

*Dear Mr Reynolds,
I am writing with regard to your proposals concerning guidelines for parrot rescue centres, and would therefore like to contribute our own proposals in the hope of our Charity being perceived as the exemplified standard. But first I would like to mention that I have viewed your own proposals, to which I agree.*

The possible introduction of guidelines/standards is not before time. There are many unscrupulous

people who are jumping on the 'band wagon' and setting themselves up as parrot rescue services with the intention of breeding and hand-rearing offspring for profitable gain. This is unacceptable and, subsequently, has become a serious problem to the welfare of such parrots, as these people are not knowledgeable and thus fail to understand and recognise the terms: neurosis, malnutrition, environmental requirements, stimuli, psychology and specialised avian care, which all rescued parrots need due to their history of abuse. We estimate that only 25 percent of companion parrots are being cared for in the correct manner, which I feel is a generous estimate!

We would like to see the implementation of approved criteria for those sanctuaries that house/rescue/rehome parrots. This is essential if parrot welfare is to move forward, as the present status quo is such that I find myself on the side of anti bird keeping, especially in the category of the companion parrot!

However, who sets the criteria? It should never be said or presumed that a parrot keeper/breeder of 10, 20 or 30 years standing is doing it right because of his/her years of experience - too many are set in their old ways of bird keeping and easily dismiss current data. I feel it is only those who are so deeply passionate who are most able to share an affinity with parrots. Parrot keeping is so contradictory and so controversial because it is charged on the depth of our emotions and understanding.

We are now witnessing the amalgamation of individual people who are highly aware and who deeply care about all aspects of parrot welfare and of their plight. In simple terms this means the result of organised pressure groups campaigning for a higher standard of care for both aviary and companion parrot, not forgetting the abolition of the wild-caught bird trade and a nationwide ban on bird auctions.

I would like to draw your attention to the fact that we have now terminated our rehoming service. The simple fact of the matter is that it does not work! We have carried out three repossessions and received half our birds back from their adoptive homes: parrots need stability and to continue such an operation would be doing these parrots a gross injustice. Education on a mass scale is the only way forward, including all societies, sanctuaries, charitable trusts,

rescue centres and rehoming services setting an example. This applies to bird magazines which should be more conscientious about the contents of their published articles.

Yours sincerely
Julie Hamilton
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These views are strongly made, and demonstrate the concern felt by many about the plight of large numbers of captive parrots. It has to be said that some scientists and

then?' our advice to new or would-be parrot owners. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that the way most parrots are kept is satisfactory.

So in this 35th *PsittaScene* let us open up discussion of this matter, which affects perhaps one third of all the parrots in captivity. WPT has calculated that there may be as many as 50 million parrots in captivity worldwide. If anyone has an alternative number, please let us know about it. If a third of those are being treated with indifference or actual cruelty, through ignorance

young every year, and we would not want to deprive these birds of that essential biological fulfillment. It must also be stated that at Paradise Park we earn a small percentage of our income from the sale of birds, although we also contribute many to breeding programmes free of charge.

What we need to strive for is a fresh and more concerned outlook on the welfare of captive parrots. It is not difficult to understand and sympathise with the anguish of a parrot rescuer who does not want any more parrots bred because they cannot be guaranteed a happy life.

More than anything else we need to provide EDUCATION for the many people who, like us, will succumb to the insidious charm of the parrots, and wish to bring them into their lives. This is proposed in the following 'Guidelines for Parrot Rescue', which I recently circulated to a variety of knowledgeable people, asking for comments and criticism. Nobody has disagreed with these guidelines, although some doubt has been expressed at my admittedly questionable guesstimates on numbers.

A VERY REAL PROBLEM

Please, fellow aviculturists, do not take offence at my review of this very real problem, and the suggestions put forward for trying to remove a blot on our hobby.

And also, fellow conservationists, try to understand the passion that lies beneath the commitment that many of us have to learning more about the intricate, fascinating lives of our beautiful birds. At the time of writing this, using colour tv cameras, we have the privilege of seeing two pairs of macaws inside their nests, brooding their eggs, preening each other so solicitously, the male feeding the female, and engaging in other instructive behaviour. Any day now we hope to see chicks hatching - how wonderful that will be! And what we learn from our captive birds will add to our ability to help them in the wild.

STOP PRESS

In conversation with an executive at Disney's Animal Kingdom I learn that they have just accepted a small group of rescued parrots from the Doris Day Foundation.

The birds will be rehabilitated at the Animal Kingdom in Orlando, Florida. With a lead like this from the mighty Disney organisation, perhaps others will accept a share of responsibility for the birds that fall by the wayside.



Kirsty at Paradise Park with hand-reared Hawkheaded Parrot.

Photo: Ali Reynolds

conservationists take only a passing interest in what happens to parrots outside of the wild populations. A major supporter of WPT would prefer us not to spend too much time on the welfare of captive birds, but concentrate on the wild ones.

My response is that we have published 34 issues of *PsittaScene* which have dealt primarily with conservation and very little with parrot welfare. It's true that we have advocated large flights and environmental enrichment, succeeded in having 300 Goffin's Cockatoos returned by trappers into the wild, published words of wisdom from Sally Blanchard on feather-picking, and issued 200,000 copies of 'Who's a lucky boy,

or neglect, that is an appalling indictment of our species.

PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

I feel the need to accept a share of personal responsibility. As an aviculturist for thirty years I have collected and kept over 200 species of birds, perhaps half of them parrots, and have bred 150 species. With my family and superb staff I still get a terrific thrill from any breeding success, whether it's a nestful of Hoopoes, a Wattle Crane, or a Hyacinth Macaw. We recently reared our first ever Hawkheaded Parrot, and we're really proud of him. Over the years we have brought together numerous breeding pairs that continue to rear

GUIDELINES FOR PARROT RESCUE

INTRODUCTION

The World Parrot Trust (WPT) was launched in 1989 to work for the conservation of parrots in the wild, and their welfare in captivity. In its early years it concentrated on field conservation projects in parrot range countries, but more recently it has become aware of the major welfare problem that exists with the millions of captive parrots in the developed world.

Many parrots are bought on a whim, perhaps as a 'prestige pet'. The purchaser may have no comprehension of the complex needs of a parrot, and will not realize the implications of taking on an animal that may live four times as long as a cat or dog, and will need as much care and attention as a human infant, but for perhaps forty years. In time, when the size of the commitment sinks in, the owner may neglect or even abuse the bird. At that point it may be sold on, given away, or offered to a parrot rescue organization. It has to be said, of course, that some parrots that have been kept in satisfactory conditions may have to be taken on by others, due to the age or ill-health of their owners.

What is the scale of the problem? The World Parrot Trust, with the help of the MORI poll organization, found that there were in excess of 600000 large parrots (excluding budgies) in the UK in 1990. Extrapolating that figure on a population basis suggests that there are at least 3 million parrots in the US, although we are advised that the total may be nearer to 5 million. Globally the total can be estimated at 50 to 60 million captive parrots, since these birds are as popular as pets in their countries of origin as they are in the rest of the world.

In time it may be possible to create an international education campaign to improve the lot of pet birds, but in the meantime we should try to address the problem in our own back yard. Paradise Park, in Cornwall UK, where the WPT is based, has been taking in unwanted parrots for twenty years, but is now full to capacity as are most zoos and bird parks. We know of many parrot rescue groups in the UK, USA, Benelux, Germany, Italy and other countries. These groups vary greatly in size, style, and methods, but what they have in common is a serious

shortage of funds.

The great majority of these groups are set up by genuine parrot lovers who recognise the problem and the need for action, and are able to fund the work themselves, or with the help of like-minded friends. Their work is likely to be limited by shortage of funds, space, time, or all three. If we return to the numbers of parrots needing rescue, we can start by noting our experience in the UK, which is supported by input from avian vets. We believe that as many as 30% of all pet parrots are seriously neglected. Inadequate nutrition, cage-bound with no space to spread wings, no spraying, no branches to chew, insanitary conditions, no veterinary support. This is based on visits to homes all over the UK, and no doubt will apply in other countries.

This results in about 200000 cases of neglect in the UK, 1 to 1.6 million in the US, and as many as 20 million worldwide. From the practical point of view it is fortunate that not all these unfortunate birds will be offered for rescue at the same time.

In the UK there may be 20 rescue centres, each handling an average of 100 parrots in a year. If this guesswork is at all accurate, this means that about 2000 parrots are 'rescued' in the UK each year. But that meets only 1% of the need. If, in the US, there are 100 rescue groups handling 100 birds each year, this comes to 10000 parrots, or less than 1% of the birds in trouble. The reader will appreciate that many of our calculations are speculative, but we have to start somewhere. We would welcome information from informed sources in any country.

What cannot be denied is the sheer scale of the problem. There is no likely source of funds that WPT is aware of, that could even begin to meet the cost of this urgent animal welfare task.

Individually, and as a 'movement', we can ask for help from companies and foundations associated with aviculture and the pet business, but this cannot be expected to solve the problem.

Our conclusion at this point is that the rescue groups will continue to do their best for the parrots and will relieve much suffering, but will be unable to cope with the majority of birds needing help.

SOME PROPOSALS

Any individual or organization committed to aviculture will naturally have concern for the welfare of all parrots. It has to be recognized, however, that all aviculturists, pet owners, and pet-related businesses have contributed to the creation of this welfare problem. The World Parrot Trust believes we must together accept responsibility, and take the following action:

- *Support a complete ban on the trapping, trading and export of wild-caught parrots from their countries of origin, unless for approved breeding programmes.*
- *Voluntarily reduce the numbers of parrots being bred in captivity. The aim should be quality, not quantity.*
- *Educate potential new pet parrot owners, so that they properly understand the commitment they are making.*
- *Help rescue groups wherever possible, with funding and facilities.*

The point here is that an over-supply of parrots exists, and this leads to lower prices for the producer, and easier access to parrot ownership for people who may not be suitable owners. As well as trying to solve the many individual problems, we should address the structural faults in the world of parrots: too many wild-caught birds still reaching developed countries, to be added to too many aviary-bred birds.

In these circumstances, is it unreasonable to propose that commercial objectives might be given less priority, in favour of welfare objectives?

We must emphasise that the World Parrot Trust was founded and is run by aviculturists, and supports our hobby through thick and thin. Our 'Manifesto for Aviculture' was distributed internationally in February 1997 (write in if you would like a copy), and has had some effect in promoting the concept of 'responsible aviculture'. This responsibility surely includes caring for the parrots that become 'unsuccessful' pets and are condemned to miserable, unfulfilled lives.

GUIDELINES FOR PARROT RESCUE

These are simply a draft for discussion, based on information supplied by rescue groups. We

invite further input from all sources of expertise and opinion.

1. Any group engaged in this task should ensure it has sufficient funding, wide experience of working with parrots, suitable accommodation, expert veterinary support, and sound methods of assessing foster homes.
2. The motivation must be nothing other than the rescue, rehabilitation and longterm welfare of the birds. The profit motive has no place in parrot rescue.
3. Stability is vital. This means a total commitment on the part of the people involved, plus reasonable financial status. A business plan is recommended.
4. Some expertise in public relations is important, to maximise publicity about parrots in difficulty, the rescue service available, and the need for funds and other forms of support. It is also important to work effectively with local parrot people, clubs, and authorities.
5. The quality and range of facilities must be adequate. Separate quarantine, hospital, rehabilitation and pre-release sections are essential. Supervision at all stages by an avian veterinarian is strongly recommended.
6. Re-homing of rehabilitated birds is a key element in the work of most rescue operations. This requires inspection of would-be foster homes, the education of those taking on responsibility for the bird, a document recording the precise commitment being undertaken, and effective follow-up to ensure that all is well. Integration of rehabilitated birds of endangered species into an EEP or other approved breeding project is recommended.

CONCLUSION

The World Parrot Trust will publish these notes in *PsittaScene*, and will ask other relevant publications to draw attention to the problem we have described. It will also communicate with authorities that may have interest in this issue. We welcome comment and criticism.

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