

## Haven for abandoned birds

Rescue group needs financial help to continue work



Foster Parrots worker Paul Brennan visits with a few of the 230 abandoned bird sheltered at the Rockland facility.

(Globe Staff Photo/John Tlumacki)

By Kimberly Atkins, Globe Staff Correspondent, 8/29/2002

Marc Johnson answers the phone, which has rung six times in an hour, and is relieved the caller has dialed the wrong number. "Thank you," he says.

Most of the many calls Johnson receives are from frustrated pet owners who want to bring a cockatoo, conure, macaw or other pet bird to Foster Parrots, a nonprofit parrot rescue organization Johnson has run out of his Rockland home for 12 years.

Johnson, with the help of two full-time staff members and two part-time employees, spends his days tending to the 230 birds that fill all three levels of his white house and its adjacent barn.

"I haven't had a day off in three years," Johnson said. He paused to inspect various birds; some have been wounded and abused, and they come from all over New England.

But Johnson said he does not know how much longer he can continue his work. He said he needs a corporate sponsor to open a parrot sanctuary and educational center that would not only provide a safe home for abandoned birds, but also a place where prospective owners can learn that birds aren't typical domesticated animals.

**"Most people get them because they are a kind of trendy decoration," said Johnson, who receives as many as a dozen calls each day from bird owners tired of the incessant noise, expense, and damage to their homes caused by their feathered pets. "There needs to be an education component," he said.**

**Johnson and other animal activists say the number of abandoned birds is skyrocketing, leaving the relatively few rescue organizations struggling to meet the demand. Johnson blames the pet industry, which he said markets what are essentially wild animals as house pets. New parrot owners, he said, unwittingly ensure that their birds will become physically and psychologically abused by turning them into what Johnson calls "perch potatoes" - birds with clipped wings that live on seed diets.**

**"Imagine if you could only sit on a couch all day and eat nothing but potato chips. That's what happens. They are not getting any of the exercise and interaction mature birds [need] and that's unhealthy, not to mention psychologically damaging. No one would ever get a dog and tape his legs together so he can't go past the kitchen."**

**Animal protection advocates say the problem is growing with the popularity of parrots, which are now the third most commonly purchased house pet. The birds can live for as long as 70 to 100 years, and can cost from a few hundred dollars to \$2,000.**

**"Most people are not equipped to deal with a parrot, especially when the bird screams from dawn to dusk and it's eating the woodwork," said Richard Farinato, director of the captive wildlife protection program at the Humane Society's Washington, D.C., headquarters. "They demand a lot of space and attention. If you get a bird, you should know that you have to be that bird's full-time partner, taking care of all its psychological needs."**

**Farinato said the problem is the lack of information given by pet store employees to new owners.**

**"These birds are marketed almost as impulse items," Farinato said. "They are beautiful and they are placed [in stores] in places where children can see them."**

**"The pet industry gives all the wrong information," Johnson said. "People don't know how much space a cockatoo needs." He pointed to a cage in his backyard that is 10 feet high and 7 feet deep. It holds two cockatoos. "That's a minimum."**

**"Major pet chains will sell these birds in an 18-inch-by-18-inch cage, and say that's all they need," adds staff worker Paul Brennan.**

**But Barbara Fitzgerald, senior vice president of store operations for PetsMart, said the company tries to ensure that the birds they sell end up in the homes of caring, well-informed owners.**

**"Before anyone is allowed to make a purchase of the bird, we require three visits with the bird in the store," Fitzgerald said by phone from PetsMart's Phoenix headquarters. She said every bird owner is provided with a booklet about caring for birds. Each bird comes with a**

**14-day guarantee, she said, and the company helps bird owners overwhelmed by their new pets find a new home for them.**

**Petco officials did not return calls for comment.**

**As much as he needs a corporate backer to help create a sanctuary and education center, Johnson said, he has little time to devote to making it happen. Every day is filled with providing care for his birds, and with securing grants and private donations to run Foster Parrots, which costs about \$125,000 a year, he said.**

**Foster Parrots' bird population isn't getting any smaller, either. While birds can be adopted, the requirements Johnson places on potential owners are so strict that adoptions are fairly rare. Potential owners must first undergo six months of volunteer work at Foster Parrots. Then, they are subject to unannounced home visits, which could result in forfeiture of the bird if it is not being adequately cared for.**

**Amy Rhodes, spokeswoman for the Norfolk, Va.-based People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, said but the problem of pet bird abandonment cases is getting worse, largely because most of the birds have nowhere to go.**

**"There are very few legitimate and reputable bird sanctuaries in the country," Rhodes said. "In fact, I almost cringe when people call looking for permanent bird sanctuaries. I know of less than six I would feel comfortable referring them to. There are few people like Marc who are really in this for the birds."**

**Johnson wants to stay in it for the birds, he said, but the need for financial help is urgent.**

**"I'm putting the call out to companies looking to provide the financial backing. We'll even give naming rights."**

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