

It's time to stop breeding birds

So says Foster Parrots Ltd. founder Marc Johnson, who sees little reason to continue producing pets that almost always lose their homes

MARC JOHNSON thinks breeding parrots is wrong, and hopes that those who engage in the practice eventually go the way of the dodo.

"Breeders' attempts to justify the reasons for why they are here usually falls under the conservation claim, which for the most part is bogus," says Johnson, founder and director of the nonprofit parrot rescue organization Foster Parrots Ltd.

"Yes, they may preserve a species in captivity, but what is that really worth? It's worth money in their pockets, because the rarer the species the more expensive the bird."

Johnson comes by his hard-line opinions honestly. For the last 10 years he has devoted his life to finding new homes for the unwanted byproduct of breeders' livelihoods--a ragtag parade of some 350 macaws, cockatoos, Amazons, conures, cockatiels and other species abandoned by their owners.

This summer, Johnson and a handful of other parrot lovers formed the Avian Welfare Coalition to lobby for legislation protecting captive birds.

Unlike similar welfare organizations, the coalition opposes captive breeding and favors adoption of homeless birds, of which there are thousands in this country alone.

"I'm not against people *keeping* parrots," Johnson stresses. "I'm looking for homes all the time. But the rate we are adopting birds out is much slower than the rate we're taking them in."

Johnson estimates he has placed about half of the 80 birds he's received so far this year.

Breeding has "pretty much saturated the market of available homes."



Residents of Foster Parrots, Ltd., enjoy open space in Marc Johnson's renovated barn.

Wally the blue-and-gold

Johnson cares for homeless parrots full-time in his 170-year-old house and attached barn in Rockland, Mass., a quaint town of 15,000 located 20 miles southeast of Boston. Currently he houses 210 birds ranging in size from tiny parrotlets to macaws.

It all started back in 1991 when Johnson scanned the local want ads for a parrot to keep him company in his Cambridge pottery studio.



This lucky cockatoo found a new home with a volunteer shortly after arriving at Foster Parrots.

When he went to see Wally, a blue-and-gold macaw, Johnson found the 50-year-old bird crammed into a cage less than two feet wide and 14 inches deep.

The owner, a woman whose living room furniture and walls had almost been destroyed by parrots, begged Johnson to also take Wally's smaller pal, a mitted conure named Bill.

Soon, people coming into Johnson's studio began asking him to take their birds, too.

"I was completely naïve and uneducated," he says now. "I thought maybe we would see up to 20 or so birds a year and be able to find them homes without any problem."

Birds take over the house

That's what happened at first. However, as Johnson went about redistributing birds into new homes, he began to hear troubling reports of their deaths.

"The people we gave them to had no idea what they were doing. They were dying from egg binding, an illness, being squashed. We knew we had to become more organized and strict."

Johnson put together an extensive list of rules to govern adoptions, now a common practice among parrot rescuers. Foster Parrot is unique in that it requires some adopters to donate up to six months of volunteer work before taking home a bird.

By 1993, parrots had taken over the three-room duplex Johnson shared with his wife, Marilee. The couple decided to move their two macaws, six conures and 10 lovebirds into a house in the country located on three-quarters of an acre.

In recent years parrots have overrun the new house and barn as well. Johnson first turned the upper floor of the barn into an aviary and taught pottery classes on the first floor.

Soon, bird cages and supplies spilled into the studio and Johnson's students could not hear him speak over the racket of screaming parrots.

Three years ago he mothballed his pottery equipment and turned over an additional 750 square feet to the parrots--who also occupy 70 percent of Johnson's home.

This summer, Johnson and his wife parted ways, a sad side effect of his around-the-clock commitment to the parrot-welfare movement.



A dentist adopted Ingmar, a neglected African grey received by Foster Parrots, and had his deformed beak fixed.

Challenging days

Johnson doesn't remember being particularly attracted to parrots as a kid.

However, since he founded Foster Parrots his parents have sent him posters he made as a 10-year-old about bird conservation and a sweetly innocent poem he wrote about the carefree life birds must have.

The poem is now posted on the Foster Parrots Web site, accompanied by a grimmer counterpoint verse written by an older, wiser Johnson.



Dusky-headed conures Spaz and Kiwi enjoy

one another's company at Foster Parrots, Ltd. Today Johnson can't imagine his life without parrots, which helps when his charges behave in ungrateful ways.

Wally, Foster Parrots' first bird, has sent Johnson to the hospital twice. The first time, the macaw used Johnson's nose as a beakhold while trying to escape from another bird.

Later that same week, Wally lunged at Johnson as he walked by and sliced his upper lip.

Johnson was so embarrassed to think he might be recognized at the first hospital, he went to a different emergency room to get stitches.

Such attacks are not malicious, merely playful, he says. Unfortunately, it's the type of behavior that causes parrots to lose their homes.

"The parrot population is maturing and what we're seeing are Amazons and macaws that are proving to be more difficult than people had planned. The image the pet trade gives people is 'Stand here and I'll take your picture covered with birds.'

"I get bitten badly all the time. I usually walk around bleeding," he continues. "But the depth of my sorrow for the birds allows me to be very forgiving."

Fund-raising smarts

Unlike some parrot rescue operations, which quickly fold for lack of funding, Johnson has learned how to raise money by writing successful grant proposals. This year he has already drummed up \$60,000 and expects \$40,000 more to trickle in. Even so, it may not be enough.

Johnson will use part of the money to pay himself rent so he can continue to make his mortgage. He also hopes to hire more help.

Currently, he pays a part-time wage to Foster Parrots' assistant director, Karen Lee, and works 70 unpaid hours a week himself. Ten volunteers help when they can.

When the burden seems too much, the 47-year-old Johnson takes solace in the inspiring words of one of his favorite singers, John Denver.

"He always had the message of hope and to keep trying. And I think on those days nobody shows up here, I listen to John Denver all day long."

Publicity will help

As one of the largest parrot rescue efforts in the United States, Foster Parrots regularly attracts the attention of the media. Most recently, the organization received coverage on the front page of the [Washington Post](#).

On Oct. 16, Johnson will appear in a PBS [Scientific American Frontiers](#) segment on parrots hosted by Alan Alda.

Every interview fuels his hopes that publicity will help effect the changes he and likeminded rescuers long to see.

One goal of the Avian Welfare Coalition is to convince pet store chains to stop selling pet birds, just as some stores have stopped selling kittens and puppies.

Failing that, Johnson hopes to improve the treatment of retail birds by pushing through legislation that defines a minimum cage size, among other guidelines.

If the pet trade does not comply, he says, “they can look forward to not only boycotting, but active picketing outside stores. It’s a movement that’s gaining strength.”

With Johnson heading up the ranks, one doesn’t doubt it.



Photo courtesy Michael Lutch.

Alan Alda and Irene Pepperberg visited Johnson at Foster Parrots to tape a PBS special on homeless parrots.