



Bye-Bye Birdie

Parrots' Demands Often Prompt Owners to Take Flight

By Laura LaFay

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ROCKLAND, Mass. -- The seven macaws in Marc Johnson's living room scream at each other all day long.

"Shut up!" they yell. "Knock it off, willya?" Several have distinctive, in-your-face New York accents. "I thawt I told you guys to shaddup!"

The birds are not fighting. They're not even mad. These are the only words they know.

"That's because that's all they ever hear," Johnson said. "People buy one of these birds, stick it in a cage, go to work and leave it alone all day. When they come home nine hours later, they're too tired to deal with it. So they yell at it to shut up."

Johnson runs a nonprofit parrot rescue organization called Foster Parrots Ltd. and harbors about 200 Macaws, Cockatoos, Conures, Amazons, Lorikeets, African Greys and other exotic birds in his 170-year-old house and barn. All have been abandoned or left with him by owners fed up with the noise, the mess, the expense, the time requirements and the behavioral problems that come with keeping a demanding, and genetically wild, flock animal alone in a cage.

Parrots have become the third most popular pet in the United States, after cats and dogs, but they can be problematic. Up to 40 million birds are estimated to be living as pets in American homes. Every year, thousands are abandoned or taken to animal shelters and rescue operations like Johnson's because they scream too much, or bite, or they have started to pull out their own feathers.

"This is a huge problem," said Richard Farinato, director of the Humane Society's captive wildlife protection program in Washington. He said shelters receive birds "all the time now, sometimes in large numbers. It's happening in California, Florida, Texas, Wisconsin, New York. It's to the point where whenever there is a Federation of Humane Societies meeting, this is a big topic of discussion."

"Most owners have no idea what they're getting into when they buy a bird," Farinato said. "And most sellers don't tell them."

Unlike cats and dogs, which have been domesticated for thousands of years, even parrots bred in captivity are a few generations removed from the wild. The instinctive behaviors that serve parrots well in their native habitats -- screaming, biting, chewing and flinging food around -- do not endear them to the typical American pet owner.

Add to that a lifespan of 20 to 80 years and a list of intractable, and often frightening, parrot pathologies that can develop when a single, sexually mature bird is kept isolated in a cage all day, and many parrot owners can not get rid of their pets fast enough.

The Humane Society asserts that "birds as pets should be limited to those who have been domesticated cage birds," Farinato said. "Canaries, cockatiels, parakeets and maybe some finches. We don't feel parrots are appropriate pets for the majority of people. Most of them -- from conures on up to macaws -- are very difficult to keep. The demands of their care, both physical and psychological, are very high."

A decade ago, said Farinato, few Americans bothered to breed parrots in captivity. Most exotic birds in the United States were caught in their native habitats and imported.

But in 1992, in an effort to promote their conservation in the wild, Congress passed the Wild Exotic Bird Conservation Act, banning the importation of parrots captured in the wild. Since then, breeding parrots has become a lucrative pastime for individual breeders, whose prices can range from \$50 for a cockatiel to \$7,000 for a rare hyacinth macaw.

People buy parrots because they are beautiful and they talk, said British parrot behavioralist Greg Glendell. Yet at the same time, he said, "People think they're like flowers. Or fish. Some kind of decorative object or conversation piece. They're nice. And if they're not nice after a couple of months, get rid of them."

Ironically, Glendell said, the same intelligence and sensitivity that attract people to parrots often ultimately drive them away. Left isolated and under-stimulated, sensitive, intelligent beings tend to lose their minds. This is the point at which a pet parrot's popularity tends to end.

Few people know this better than Johnson, whose operation resembles a sort of cherry-headed, blue-fronted, yellow-faced, green-winged, peach-cheeked, sulfur-crested avian bedlam.

Barely noticeable at first in the din of exultant shrieking, squawking and calling, perched motionless in the feathered chaos of heads bobbing, wings flapping, preening and swooping, are Johnson's hard cases: a featherless, formerly cherry-headed conure; a cockatoo named Natasha pulling at the skin of an open wound on her leg; a half-plucked Moluccan cockatoo compulsively imitating the hollow electronic drone of an AM radio announcer.

On the other hand, there are success stories. Several birds that arrived at Foster Parrots looking ready for the stewpot are now fully feathered. Dozens have forged close relationships with other birds, forming bonds that can last a lifetime. Adoptions into parrot-friendly homes are not infrequent. Many previously caged and solitary birds have discovered the joys of flight and the companionship of other parrots in Johnson's barn.

Foster Parrots is one of about 50 official nonprofit parrot rescue organizations that have sprung up to handle the evolving epidemic of troubled and unwanted parrots. These operations, spread across 22 states, range from well-funded foundations to makeshift aviaries in basements and rec rooms. In the Washington area, Dee Thompson of Parrot Rescue Maryland takes in birds, works as a behavioral consultant and conducts parrot education classes. Rescue Me, in Ark, Va., keeps some birds and places others in foster homes.

Johnson, of Foster Parrots, started out with one bird. Ten years ago, he was a Cambridge potter who thought a parrot might be good company. Soon, customers began asking him to take their parrots off their

hands. Eventually, Johnson closed his pottery shop, and he and his wife, Merilee Burrell, moved with their parrots to their house in Rockland.

The parrots gradually took over. Johnson built perches and large enclosures and installed cages on the first floor of the barn. Then on the second floor of the barn. Then in the breezeway connecting the barn to the house. Then the kitchen and the living room. He became a kind of St. Francis of parrots, rescuing them from abusive and neglectful situations, nursing them back to health and recapturing those found lost in suburban trees.

"I was honestly naive," he said. "I started out thinking we would only be seeing 10 to 20 birds a year in trouble. But as we got better known and as the scope of the problem grew, it kind of evolved. . . . There was a point when I realized things were so desperate, I couldn't turn my back on it. I'm constantly saying, 'Okay. It's just one more bird. One more bird won't make a huge difference.' "

Foster Parrots, originally "Planned Parrothood," was incorporated in 1999. It has a fluctuating number of volunteers who help care for the birds. Last year, it took in \$37,000 in grants and donations. But the organization is taking its toll on its founder. At 47, Johnson is burned out and depressed, especially on days when no volunteers show up to help. His dream of building a separate facility for the birds seems far off. This summer, weary of parrots and desirous of a different path in life, his wife decided to move out. Her impending departure has made Johnson both sadder and more resolute.

"As soon as she leaves, I'm putting all the conures in her office," he said. "We need the space."

Johnson's chief problem -- taking in more birds than he can handle -- is common among parrot rescuers. More people want to get rid of the birds than are willing to take them in.

Johnson tries diligently to find second and third homes for his birds, but his strict adoption policies deter many takers. For starters, he requires six months of volunteer work with the bird. After that, he reserves the right to reclaim the bird if, during an unannounced visit within two years of the adoption, he decides the bird is not doing well.

In Maryland, Dee Thompson "realized very quickly that it's hard to find people willing to make the necessary commitment." She started out as a breeder, but stopped after deciding there already were too many unwanted parrots. Fifteen years later, she said she takes about 100 calls a year regarding problem parrots.

"These birds are very difficult to keep as pets. Their needs are very special. They are not family pets. Birds in the wild are monogamous. They seek out a single mate. It's one of the things we like about them, but if we expect the bird to go to every member of the family, we're not being realistic," Thompson said.

"Another thing is, the needs of a bird won't change. It's not like a cat or a dog that gets older and slows down and doesn't need as much attention. A bird is going to need the same amount of attention in 40 years as it does now."

Driven to distraction, some people simply release their birds into suburbia or allow them to escape. But non-native parrots bred in captivity do not have the skills to survive in such circumstances. Unfamiliar with predators, shelter and seasonal foods, and lacking a flock for protection, they invariably come to grief.

Other owners literally abandon their birds. Johnson has a blue-fronted Amazon that was found inside a cage marooned at a local dump. He also has an umbrella cockatoo that was stuffed into a cardboard box and left on the front steps of the New England Wildlife Center. Eileen McCarthy, director of the Midwest

Avian and Adoption Rescue Services in Minnesota, has a feather-plucked mitred conure that was found in South Dakota on Thanksgiving Day 2000.

"He was in a cage with no food and no water, in freezing temperatures, by the side of a rural highway," McCarthy said.

McCarthy, Johnson and other parrot rescuers recently formed the Avian Welfare Coalition to lobby for legislation protecting captive birds. The organization supports the adoption of homeless birds, opposes breeding for the pet trade and promotes education "in all areas of avian welfare."

"What have we done to these birds?" asked Denise Kelly, a New York City parrot lover who founded the organization.

"We love them because they're smart and they can fly and they're free. And then we stick them in a cage and make them completely dependent on us and clip their wings and take away their ability to fly. And then when they don't meet our expectations, we want to get rid of them."

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There is no universal solution to problem pet parrot behavior. "It's species-specific, it's bird-specific and it's household-specific," said Dee Thompson of Parrot Rescue Maryland. But one thing is certain: "The longer you wait, the worse it will get."

This, avian experts say, is because many owners unwittingly reinforce objectionable behavior by the way they react to a parrot -- or because the behavior might be a response to something the owner is or is not doing. Other problems can be traced to faulty lighting, insufficient sleep, hormonal imbalances and diet.

"The first thing you can do is buy a good book on parrot behavior published in the last five years," Thompson said. "You can go on the Internet and look for lists specific to your particular species of bird. An avian vet will often refer you to a behavioral consultant. But if none of that works, call someone who does rescue work. We've seen everything -- the screamers, the biters, the mutilators. And if we can't help you, we'll probably know someone who can."

If all else fails, or if you lack the time, commitment or inclination to work with your bird, consider placing it in a stable new home or a reputable rescue. For a list of parrot rescues nationwide, go to www.parrotchronicles.com.

Dee Thompson can be reached at ParrotRescueMaryland@hotmail.com.

Helpful Web sites include: www.fosterparrots.com, www.maars.org, www.petbirdreport.com, www.avianweb.com, www.larra.org, www.the-oasis.org and www.rescueme.org.

At least one facility, the Oasis Sanctuary, in Arizona, provides permanent homes for parrots whose behavior renders them unsuitable as pets.

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