

## LOCAL NEWS

# Room to spread their wings: Parrot sanctuary needs more space to take care of unwanted exotic birds

By COURTNEY HOLLANDS  
*The Patriot Ledger*

ROCKLAND - There isn't enough room for the parrots anymore. With more than 200 parrots of various species squawking and flapping around his Rockland house, Marc Johnson cannot take another neglected or abandoned bird under his wing.

Johnson and Karen Lee are the co-directors of Foster Parrots Ltd., a sanctuary for unwanted exotic birds that was founded near Rockland Center in 1999.

The parrot rescue and adoption project started small in the early 1990s, with cockatoos and macaws inhabiting the loft of Johnson's attached barn, but news soon spread, and now Foster Parrots gets calls from all over the South Shore and from southern Vermont and New Hampshire.

Today, floor-to-ceiling cages, food and fowl fill not only the barn but Johnson's living room, dining room, office and upstairs. Lee, Johnson, a part-time assistant and more than 20 volunteers tend to the birds each day.

Even famed primate researcher Jane Goodall paid a visit to the Rockland-based sanctuary in May.

Because parrots can live up to 100 years, Lee said, the sanctuary also gets calls from elderly people who are writing their wills and want their bird to be cared for in a safe place after they die.

Lee estimates that Foster Parrots has to turn away as many as 12 birds each week.

"When people buy a bird, they don't know how intelligent, how demanding they are," she said, a green parrot named Gus perched on her shoulder. "They don't like the noise and so they decide to euthanize the bird."

Four years ago, Johnson and Lee looked into building a 5-acre sanctuary on donated land in Marshfield until land disputes pushed the prospect off the table.

Johnson and Foster Parrots board of directors Chairman Brian Cullity visited Pekuri tribe territory in Guyana in December 2002. While there, the men talked to chief Damon Corrie, who was interested in starting an ecotourism initiative on 250 acres of his tribe's land.

In September 2003, Johnson and Cullity wrote the "Nancy Lewis Cullity Parrot Protection Act," in memory of Cullity's late wife, which provides protection for parrots and other native wildlife within the 250-acre Guyana territory.

"The Guyana Project is in the formative stages right now," said Johnson, noting that the project is still waiting for more grant money. "It's a great opportunity to show the native people how to make a living while protecting and saving parrots."

One bird observation platform has already been built, and three canoes have been purchased. Johnson said that Foster Parrots is scouting land to build a tourist lodge. He and Cullity will return to Guyana next month.



**Karen Lee is a co-director of Foster Parrots, a sanctuary in Rockland that takes in homeless and abandoned parrots. (GARY HIGGINS/The Patriot Ledger)**

By next fall, Johnson hopes to take Rockland residents and other locals on ecotours of the parrot reserve. "People will be able to connect with parrots in the wild, to see the true nature of these animals," he said.

"To see a bird in the wild is so beautiful, it brings tears to my eyes," Lee said.

Now Foster Parrots is looking at land much farther away to reintroduce some of its wilder birds to nature and ease the space crunch.

Foster Parrots is also studying a 200-acre land parcel in central Florida to build the nation's largest sanctuary, Johnson said. Construction on that project is expected to cost \$3 million to \$4 million. The money will have to come primarily from grants and private donors, he added.

In the meantime, Johnson is planning a greenhouse expansion on the back of his house for a cockatoo habitat.

He said that the parrot adoption rate is low because prospective owners do not want to go through Foster Parrots' rigorous adoption route, which includes up to six months of volunteer time at the shelter.

"These birds have no place to go," Johnson said. "Because of the pet trade, parrot overpopulation is creeping up on us. I wonder if society can tolerate it."

### **Foster Parrots**

—Founded: 1999

— Co-directors: Marc Johnson and Karen Lee

— Purpose: To provide a safe haven for abused and abandoned parrots.

— If you are interested in volunteering at Foster Parrots, in making a donation to the cause or in adopting one of the shelter's many species of birds, please visit the sanctuary's website at [www.fosterparrots.com](http://www.fosterparrots.com). You can also contact Foster Parrots by phone at 781-878-3733 or by sending an email to [marc@fosterparrots.com](mailto:marc@fosterparrots.com) or [karen@fosterparrots.com](mailto:karen@fosterparrots.com).