

# THE TUFTS OBSERVER ONLINE

You are here: **The Observer** > **Editor's Corner** > **Foster Parrots**

---

## **Foster Parrots**

April 23, 2004

By Thanh Nguyen

Parrots are cool. They're colorful, cute, and sometimes they can talk. "A parrot would make a perfect pet," you think. "They're like dogs. But with feathers." Wrong. Parrots are noisy, demanding, and are armed with a combination pincer and nutcracker for a beak. People who work with parrots compare them to four-year-olds: the snot-nosed temper-tantrum kind. The larger species of parrots really are about as intelligent as the average four-year-old human child, and require the same amount of attention and care. They also can live up to 100 years. But many parrot owners treat their pet birds like they would treat a dog or a cat. Would you leave your four-year-old child in a playpen all day while you were at work?

Neglected parrots become depressed and pluck their own feathers out, or even self-mutilate. They become too much for their owners to handle, and are neglected even further. Finally the parrots are abandoned and are given away to animal shelters, where they await adoption—or euthanasia. In came Marc Johnson, then a Cambridge potter. In 1990, Marc started Foster Parrots for "parrot rescue, adoption, and sanctuary." He outfitted every room in the house with cages, and turned the barn into a small aviary. Today, Foster Parrots is an official animal shelter, and Marc's life is taking care of 260 parrots with the help of three employees and 20 or so volunteers. You can find more information about Foster Parrots on the Internet at [www.fosterparrots.com](http://www.fosterparrots.com).

A friend and I are both parrot enthusiasts, so we asked Marc if we could visit Foster Parrots and take a tour. We traveled all the way to Rockland, Massachusetts by way of the commuter rail. Foster Parrots really is just a typical white house in the suburbs; the only telltale sign was the giant empty birdcage on the porch. Marc was out of town, so Foster Parrots director Karen Lee had the misfortune of giving two nosy college kids a tour. As soon as you walk through the door, you hear loud squawks nearby. Marc's office is right next to the door, and his ceiling is a massive structure of rope, wood blocks, and branches, home to about 20 macaws. Macaws and Cockatoos, the larger parrots, are kept in separate rooms (parrots are social creatures, but they're also extremely territorial).

Every room except the bathroom and the kitchen had birdcages and parrots. Many were kept inside their cages to keep them out of trouble, but most were free to roam. Instead of clipping the parrots' flight feathers to keep them tethered,

Foster Parrots lets them fly around their respective rooms. You'd expect mayhem in such a situation, but the birds were quite well behaved. Even in the barn-turned-aviary, most of the birds kept to themselves. Out of 100 or so birds, only three flew onto our shoulders while we were in there: Tula, a friendly Alexandrine Parakeet, Max, a cheeky Indian Ringneck, and Richard, a green and black parrot of a species I forgot to take note of because she was chewing on my ear at the time. (Richard's a misnamed female.) Tula was the only one that didn't leave bite marks on us, and instantly became our favorite.

In the two-story barn, Karen pointed out the various parrot couplings, including a few interspecies couples. One species of parrot even tended to be homosexual because unlike other species, males and females didn't form strong bonds. Some parrots would gravitate towards male humans and be hostile to female humans, or vice versa. Parrots are monogamous, if only for a while. The Goffins Cockatoos in the house seemed to be living their own soap opera. Annie used to be with Bino, but now she's with Sonny, so Bino has been shunned out of the group. They've been so mean to him that they had to move Bino upstairs. Bino now rooms upstairs with Lola, the abused Macaw that became the mascot for Foster Parrots' fundraiser, "The Lola Project."

Lola lived in a crate in a previous owner's basement. Whenever she made too much noise, the owner's children were told to go downstairs and kick the crate. Her head looks like it was mauled by a dog. Her left eye is missing, and the brain damage left her with sporadic paralyzing seizures. Foster Parrots is dedicated to saving abused parrots like Lola, but have sadly run out of space for more parrots. The Lola Project is hoping to raise enough funds to buy a two-acre plot of land in Hanson, MA (since the publishing of this article, that vision has expanded to a more inclusive project, The National Parrot Sanctuary on 100 acres in Central Florida) with two abandoned buildings that could shelter thousands of parrots. More information about the project can be found on the Foster Parrots website.

I originally got interested in parrots when my friend told me about the green alpine parrots of New Zealand known as Keas. They're arguably the smartest birds on the planet because since they live in such a desolate climate they've evolved to be naturally inquisitive. I've been a parrot lover ever since, and I wish I could spend time volunteering for a parrot shelter. The Tufts Veterinary School in Grafton has a selective program with Foster Parrots for 1st to 3rd year students in which you get credit for volunteering. If you plan on being a veterinary student, I hope you take advantage of the program and volunteer. Say hi to Tula, Bino, and Lola for me.