

# Extreme Bird Watchers

## Trading trapping for tourism on a Pacific island

► **By Sharon St. Joan**

As they slid along in a narrow boat, Bonnie Zimmerman spoke gently to the rainbow lorikeet – Lucky, as he would later be called.

Earlier that day, the group of half a dozen good friends, both American and Indonesian, had arrived at the small village of Saka on Seram, one of the Molucan Islands in Indonesia.

To their dismay, they'd seen a parrot hanging upside-down from a perch outside a restaurant. Sadly, it is the custom there to attach birds to their perch on a short chain. In a moment, though, Lucky swung right-side-up again and examined his two dishes; in one there was sweet tea and in the other there was rice. That was his diet.

Zimmerman and the others, all parrot people, went into the restaurant. The two Indonesians among them began a conversation with the middle-aged woman who owned it.

She'd had Lucky for about a year. He'd been left there by a soldier who she thought had gotten him from a bird trapper. Yes, she liked the bird, but she might be persuaded to sell him.

Normally, Zimmerman and the others would never purchase a bird because he would simply be replaced by other unfortunate birds who could be sold as well. But in this case, the woman was neither a trapper nor a



Photos: Bonnie Zimmermann (unless otherwise noted)



smuggler herself, so buying Lucky wasn't going to result in a string of hapless birds being traded.

That afternoon, Lucky accompanied them on the half-hour ride back to their guesthouse in Sawai, a village of about 1,200 people. The houses stand on stilts over the water, so all transportation is by boat. They brought Lucky inside, still on his chain, which was hard to remove. Normally, lorries eat nectar, rather than sweet tea and rice, but this was an emergency, and he seemed delighted with the bits of bananas and dried fruit he was offered.

The next day came the real problem – what to do with Lucky? The Americans were only going to be there for seven more days. It is illegal (and rightly so) to import parrots into the U.S. Clearly, Lucky, whose feathers showed signs of malnutrition and who was a little thin, was in no condition to be released to the wild. On top of that, he wasn't immediately able to fly, after being constrained for a year to his two positions, either right side up or swinging upside down. They managed to extract

Lucky's leg from the chain and went to speak with the guesthouse owner.

He was a friendly, generous fellow, always kind to parrots and people. Being the village's head man, he lives in a large house with a courtyard complete with one nice big tree. Following a consultation, Lucky was put into the tree as a temporary home.

Being entirely unused to freedom, he was quite awkward at first, but soon began climbing again. They attached little cups to the tree and made sure that he had healthy food and water. Lucky was very quiet for a couple of days, absorbing his new situation. Each day he was beginning to climb a little higher up the tree.

At the end of the week, the group had to leave the island. They hoped Lucky would respond to the loud calls of the flock of rainbow lorikeets who lived in the hills behind the village. Still, no one could know for sure how things would turn out for him.

Six weeks after they had left Indonesia, Zimmerman received an e-mail. Happy news! Lucky had flown off into the hills just behind the village to join the flock of rainbow lorikeets.





That was the best possible outcome – rescued and then returned to freedom!

The rescue of Lucky was the first one the group had made on Seram, but already plans were taking shape for helping both the parrots and the people of the beautiful island.

Project Bird Watch had been started earlier by an Australian/American couple, Djuna and Damian Ivereigh. The guesthouse owner and two others from the group had been talking about how it might be possible to help the people of Seram, many of whom were desperately poor, to improve their lives.

One of the only means of earning a livelihood was trapping the salmon-crested cockatoos and other parrots on Seram, and selling them to middlemen. Some of the birds were then smuggled off the island and sold in bird markets in Europe and Asia. Others remained in the homes of wealthy Indonesians as prestige symbols.

It would only be possible to help the parrots permanently if people were no longer dependent on bird trapping for their livelihood.

What about tourism? The idea began to crystallize: The trappers could be turned into eco-tour guides. But would it work?

The first eco-tour was organized for 2001.

Dr. Stewart Metz, who previously had lived a fairly normal life as a successful internist and endocrinologist, happened to go on the tour. That experience marked the end of his fairly normal life.

A few years earlier, he had acquired a Moluccan cockatoo named China. He only had a few years with her but, he says, “China literally changed my life. She became my inspiration for leaving medicine.”

As he became increasingly aware of the plight of wild parrots who are trapped and sold, it became his mission in life to help wild parrots remain free in the forest. At first, his attention focused on helping cockatoos, who are rapidly heading toward extinction in the wild.

“I thought, maybe I can do something,” he says. “This feeling grew into a desire to do something, which, after traveling to Indonesia, then became something between a passion and an obsession.”

Southeastern Asia is home to many species of cockatoos. They are mostly white and all have a crest – hence the names of the various species: salmon-crested cockatoo (from Seram), Triton cockatoo, umbrella cockatoo, citron-crested cockatoo, Goffin’s cockatoo. There are some who are not white, like the unusual palm cockatoo.

Metz made several journeys to Indonesia, using his own resources to fund several projects. When he heard about the eco-tour, he just had to go along. A year later, he was invited to become the director of Project Bird Watch.

The group started working in small steps. The village trappers were given jobs as tour guides in exchange for giving up trapping. Locals who were sensitive to the culture and gifted at communicating the advantages of eco-tourism over trapping were brought on board.

Traditionally, cockatoos and other parrots are greatly revered



*Naldo, Pak Ali and Ceisar*

Photo: Dr. Stewart Metz



– their spirits are sacred. The people of East Seram had historically never trapped parrots at all. They had taken it up only in recent years, after visitors from the western part of the island began trapping and selling the birds. Within only a decade, the trapping had become so extensive that cockatoo populations were close to being wiped out. Today, Metz believes that all the trappers in the northern district of Sawai have been hired by Project Bird Watch and have given up trapping.

There was only one relapse. A former trapper had no money to care for his sick children. In desperation, he had begun trapping again. He'd only done it for a few weeks before stopping, but he still felt haunted by what he had done, and he had to tell someone – Bonnie Zimmerman, now the group's vice-president.

The group is not short of grand visions and the beginnings of grand realities. They run a temporary rehabilitation center, *Kembali Bebas*, which means “return to freedom.” Spread over several acres, it now houses 118 birds. Soon they will build a larger permanent facility that will allow them to accept all of the birds confiscated from trappers by the Indonesian Wildlife Rescue Network.

Eco-tours have been providing steady income for the local people, along with other projects, such as the sale of Moluccan nuts. These sources of income have saved countless cockatoos, ensuring they'll remain free. And the tours themselves provide a one-of-a-kind experience for visitors, who can see flocks of cockatoos in the wild as they trek through the rainforest, swim in streams, and boat to several of the other islands. This year, there will be one eco-tour in September and one in October.

Project Bird Watch is an amazing vision that has turned into a reality through the inspired, dedicated efforts of a half-dozen foreigners and their Indonesian colleagues.

As they lead eager tourists through the mist-filled forests, the founders know their work is creating change. Zimmerman sums it up very simply: “I'm excited every day!” 🐾

**To learn more or to contact Project Bird Watch, go to [www.indonesian-parrot-project.org](http://www.indonesian-parrot-project.org).**