



The Avian Welfare Coalition

“Dedicated to the Welfare and Protection of Captive Birds”

The True Nature of Parrots

by Denise Kelly, Joan Rae & Krista Menzel

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Parrots: Wild at Heart

More than 300 species of parrots, ranging from budgies, cockatiels, and conures, to the larger amazons, macaws, and cockatoos, are found the world over, from the rainforests of South America and the islands of the South Pacific and Caribbean, to the deserts and grasslands of Australia and Africa. Whether captured in the wild or born in captivity, parrots are not domesticated animals like cats and dogs. They are still wild, undomesticated creatures, at most only a few generations removed from their native habitats. In the wild, parrots live in flocks and can fly many miles each day. They spend hours foraging for a variety of natural foods, socializing, communicating, bathing, preening, establishing nesting territories, mating, excavating nests, and raising their young.

Even with a caretaker's best intentions and efforts, life in captivity is still a shadow of the life that parrots evolved to live in their natural habitats. The average captive parrot spends most of her life confined to a cage and is fed a monotonous, incomplete diet of manufactured bird foods. Many cannot fly because their wings have been clipped to keep them “under control” and to prevent them from hurting themselves in human homes. Few are kept in groups with their own species.

As they reach maturity, the restriction of a parrot's natural desire to fly, forage, raise young, and socialize with other birds of their own species often manifests itself in neurotic behavior such as excessive screaming, biting, aggression, feather plucking, and even self-mutilation. Like other wild “exotic pets,” many captive parrots find themselves abused, neglected, or displaced as their natural behaviors and needs clash with human expectations.

The Challenges of Keeping Parrots in Captivity

Captive parrots are still wild animals by nature. Their natural curiosity, sensitivity, intellect, playfulness, and ability to form bonds with humans can tempt people to keep them in their homes. Unfortunately, the traits that make parrots so intriguing are the same ones that make them extremely difficult to live with as companion animals. Most people cannot cope with the long-term challenges and responsibilities of caring for an undomesticated animal that is physically and psychologically adapted to live in the wild.

Aggression, Territoriality, and Mate Defense

Unlike dogs and cats, parrots clearly choose whom they wish to form strong bonds with. You may love your parrot, but it may not necessarily offer you unconditional love in return. Parrots are mischievous and territorial. They sometimes view others — even family members — as intruders and can display jealousy towards them. When they mature sexually, they often resort to aggression to keep intruders away from their mate or chosen human or to protect their territory. As prey animals, birds can be naturally suspicious and defensive around strangers or in unfamiliar situations.

Screaming and Social Demands

In the wild, parrots live and travel in flocks and maintain constant contact with their flockmates, using loud calls as a means of communication. To avoid separation anxiety, which can manifest itself in behavioral problems in a captive environment, parrots require hours of daily social interaction with their human companions as well as with other birds of their own species. There is no such thing as a quiet, independent parrot!

Failure to Entertain

Professionally trained bird shows can lead people to perceive parrots as objects of entertainment and decoration, and raise expectations that a parrot will perform similarly at home. Sadly, the fact that parrots can communicate with people in human language has also become their curse. Many parrots simply do not learn or choose to speak or perform cute tricks.

Fledging and Flight

One of the most critical periods in a parrot's life is fledging, or leaving the nest and learning to fly, find food, form social bonds, and avoid predators by following their parents. Early wing clipping can interrupt this physical and psychological process and leave birds prone to health and behavioral problems. Even as an adult, no bird is meant to be caged and kept from flying. Every system in a bird's body has evolved for efficient flying and they suffer without this crucial mental and physical exercise. Confinement in cages can lead to ill health, neurotic behavior, excessive screaming, feather plucking, self-mutilation, obesity, and other destructive habits.

Destructive Chewing

A parrot's beak is the equivalent of a human's hands. Birds use their beaks for a variety of activities that enable them to survive. They use their beaks to eat, chew, preen, and feel and hold objects. They also use them for aggressive and defensive behaviors. In the wild, the beaks of macaws and cockatoos are powerful enough to chew through tree branches and excavate nests in tree trunks; in captivity, their beaks are no less powerful. Parrots do not know the difference between a sanctioned bird toy and their homes' woodwork or furniture, so they can do great damage if left unsupervised and unrestricted.

Complicated Diet

In the wild, parrots spend a great deal of time foraging for a highly varied, seasonal diet. Because of the different nutritional needs of the various species, individual tastes, and the tactile and social nature of eating, feeding a parrot is not as simple as feeding a dog or cat. It requires daily dedication to purchasing, preparing, and serving a variety of vegetables, fruits, nuts, seeds, manufactured pellets, and "people foods" such as pasta, rice, and beans. In the wild, juvenile parrots are taught by their parents what to eat, where and when to find it, and how to eat it. Parrots not raised by their parents must be taught by their human caretakers to recognize and accept a varied diet or they will suffer nutritional deficiencies. This is often a difficult — or impossible — task.

Mess and Sanitation

Parrots are messy creatures. In their natural habitats, they drop food remains, feathers, waste, and food items to the ground. They have no instinct to keep their surroundings neat in the wild because they can afford to be messy; once they drop something they rarely come near it again. Debris falls to the ground, out of reach, and is left behind for nature's cleanup crew when the flock moves on. This may be an effective sanitation method in the wild, but certainly not in captivity. In your home, they treat your carpet as the forest floor. The constant litter of droppings, food, feathers, and shredded toys in and around the cage can quickly become unsanitary and exasperating.

Household Product Dangers

Because of the respiratory anatomy and physiology birds have evolved to support flight demands, they have extreme sensitivities to products not otherwise considered dangerous to cats and dogs. Among these are many household cleaning products, personal care products, candles, incense, air fresheners, building materials, paints, glues, plants, foods, and especially toxic fumes emitted by non-stick coated household appliances and tools such as cookware, self-cleaning ovens, irons, and heaters. People who live with birds must be very careful about the products they use in their homes.

Longevity

Many of the larger species of parrots can live 50 to 80 years in captivity. Parrots require a lifetime commitment — the equivalent of caring for a special-needs child for the rest of its life. Large parrots require such a lifetime commitment from several people because they can outlive their caretakers or their caretakers' ability to meet their needs.

The reality is that not all parrots talk, not all parrots choose to bond with humans, not all parrots are tame, not all parrots want to amuse and please people on command. However, all parrots do bite, do scream, do chew, do make messes, and do

demand intensive care and interaction. Terms like “hand-tame,” “hand-raised,” “hand-fed,” and “domestically-bred” are misunderstood. They often mislead uneducated consumers to assume they are getting a companion animal that is tame, loving, well-behaved, and will not bite.

What Happens When We Fight Nature?

Like other exotic, wild animals, parrots usually fail to fulfill most people’s expectations as companion animals because their natural instincts, needs, and behaviors conflict with ours. Misinformed mass-marketing, production breeding, and the trendy attraction and availability of exotic pets in our country are compelling more and more unprepared people to acquire birds on impulse. When parrots don’t live up to their expectations, people often become disenchanted and want to rid themselves of the responsibility of caring for these birds. Consequently, the number of parrots and other birds entering the pet trade only to be misunderstood, abused, neglected, and abandoned is soaring.

A growing number of bird rescue, adoption, and sanctuary organizations are facing the challenge of caring for the parrots discarded by those who were unprepared for the commitment required to share a home with a long-lived, undomesticated animal. They are also attempting to slow down the influx of birds into an already saturated market by educating potential “parrot people” on the realities of sharing their lives with a parrot *before* they choose to acquire a bird. To help the homeless parrots already in the system, these groups also encourage and facilitate the placement of older birds into knowledgeable, well-prepared, loving homes, or, in special health or behavior cases, into sanctuaries to live out their lives on their own terms.

Like other exotic animals, all captive parrots display many traits and needs — crucial for survival in their native habitats — that are not considered to be positive “pet qualities” in most human homes. Unfortunately, the realities and difficulties of living with parrots are not yet common public knowledge. As long as an uneducated demand continues, breeders will obligingly supply the misinformed market with birds who, sadly, will often end up neglected or discarded.

However, if the demand decreases, so will the supply! Public education about the true nature of parrots by knowledgeable individuals and organizations may compel inexperienced people to think twice before bringing a bird into their home. Only people who thoroughly understand that parrots are wild animals and who can commit to meeting their demanding needs should consider providing a home for one. Only then will all parrots kept in captivity be properly cared for and appreciated for the wild animals they are, the pet market’s demand for “impulse purchased” baby parrots will decrease, and the homeless bird epidemic will become a thing of the past.

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