



The Avian Welfare Coalition

“Dedicated to the Welfare and Protection of Captive Birds”

Avian Welfare Issues: An Overview

by Denise Kelly, Eileen McCarthy, Krista Menzel & Monica Engebretson

Revised December 2003

How Many Captive Birds: Are Population Studies Giving Us a Clear Picture?

Within the past decade, aviculture has grown from a small exotic hobby to a vast multi-million dollar industry. Captive birds are now the third most popular animals kept as “pets” in the United States. However, because birds are not required to be licensed, bird breeding remains largely unregulated, and birds are rarely taken to a veterinarian, the numbers of birds kept in captivity remains a subject of debate. Avian rescues, shelters, and sanctuaries and other animal welfare organizations recognize that determining an accurate estimate of the captive bird population is crucial to effectively addressing many avian welfare issues.

According to one study organized through pet industry resources by the Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council (PIJAC), there were 11.6 million companion birds living in 5.5 million households in 1990. Two years later, in 1992, PIJAC reported 14 million birds in 5.6 million households. PIJAC later qualified the figures from both of these years, stating that, “1990 and 1992 bird survey data [were] reportedly understated due to method of classifying breeders versus owners.” With their criteria revised, in 1994, PIJAC reported 31 million birds living in 5.7 million households, and in 1996, 40 million birds in 5.9 million households.¹ It is unclear if these statistics include only birds kept in private homes as “pets” and hobby breeders, or if they also cover birds kept exclusively in breeding facilities, wholesale/retail facilities, zoos, shelters, sanctuaries, entertainment venues, or conservation programs. But one can assume that the large increase indicates that this number does, indeed, include captive birds kept in situations other than private homes.

A 1998 article appearing in the *Journal of the American Veterinarian Medical Association*, which referenced the most extensive demographic study of pet birds conducted to date, reported the U.S. pet bird population at 35–40 million. It went on to state that, “Industry data indicates an annual growth rate of approximately 5%.” A saturation point, however, may have been reached for certain species, primarily amazons, macaws, and cockatoos.” Based on an extrapolation of these statistics, some avian welfare professionals estimate that there may be as many as 52–60 million captive birds in the U.S.

Other studies conducted by veterinary and pet industry organizations indicate far lower population numbers. A formula² that was established by the American Veterinary Medical Association for veterinarians to use in calculating the number of birds in a community indicated that there were 12.6 million birds living in 4.6 million households in 1996.³ The AVMA stated that these figures only represent birds kept as “pets” in private homes, not those living in breeding facilities, wholesale/retail facilities, zoos, shelters, sanctuaries, entertainment venues, or conservation programs. The latest study conducted by the AVMA in 2001 states that there are 10.1 million birds in 4.8 million U.S. households.⁴

Another study conducted by the American Pet Product Manufacturers Association (APPMA) reported that 19.2 million “pet” birds were in 6.9 million households in the year 2000 and 17.2 million “pet” birds in 6.7 million households in 2002, as compared with 12.8 million in 5.6 million households in 1992.

Why Numbers Alone May Not Tell The Whole Story.

While all of these estimates of “pet” birds are lower than those for companion cats and dogs, the population of cats and dogs has remained relatively stable over time while “pet” bird populations have increased substantially in recent years. With the commercialization of birds as pets and mass, production-style breeding operations, shelters, and avian welfare organizations have witnessed an alarming increase in the number of displaced/unwanted captive birds. More than half of all captive birds are classified in the order Psittaciformes, comprising more than 300 parrot species. Many of the larger parrots in captivity can live 60 years or more—4 times the lifespan of dogs and cats.⁵ The limitations of avian medicine do not provide for birds to be routinely spayed or neutered so anyone who acquires a pair of parrots has the potential to become a breeder. “Bird mills”—breeding facilities capable of producing hundreds and even hundreds of thousands of birds and bringing them to market quickly—exist all across America.

The point at which animals kept as human “companions” reach “overpopulation” is determined not by the number of animals but by the number responsible, qualified caretakers available to care for the type of animal in question. Species that have complex or demanding requirements needing skillful and knowledgeable caretakers who are prepared to commit significant time and/or resources to animal care will reach an “overpopulation” at a lower total number than species requiring less specialized care. For example, there are more people who are capable of providing care for cats and dogs than there are people who are capable of providing care for exotic animals such as parrots, reptiles, or primates. Therefore, while there may be a larger total number of homeless cats and dogs compared to homeless captive parrots, there are also a larger number of potential homes for cats and dogs while there are relatively few qualified and capable potential homes for parrots.

Many exotic bird breeders have argued that there is no “overpopulation” of parrots because they are still able to sell the birds they raise. However, the same can be said of purebred dog and cat breeders. This is because despite the well-recognized overpopulation of cats and dogs in this country, there still exists a market for purebred animals—especially purebred puppies and kittens. Likewise there continues to be a market for certain types of captive birds—especially young or baby birds. The demand for young birds is driven by a marketing myth: a young bird or even unweaned bird will guarantee a better “pet.” This widely believed myth creates a demand for young birds that is perpetuated by breeders and pet stores, thereby ensuring continued sales in a market that is over-saturated with older birds of every variety.

The Dimensions of Avian Welfare Concerns

Captive bred and raised parrots are not domesticated animals. They are wild creatures—at most only one or two generations removed from their native habitats. Even though the U.S. banned importation of most species of captured birds with the 1992 Wild Bird Conservation Act, many other countries continue to allow trapping and the export and/or import of wild-caught birds and many of the captive parrots now in homes and in adoption/sanctuary programs are wild-caught. As a result, many parrot species have suffered devastating and irrevocable depletion of populations. Habitat destruction and the encroachment of human development and consumption of natural resources are partly responsible for the numerous species at risk of extinction; however, recent studies have proven that poaching for the legal and illegal trade in wild birds plays a far greater role in the global decline of parrot populations in the wild.⁶

While aviculturists argue that captive breeding will conserve wild parrot population and preserve the gene pool of critically endangered species, the reality is quite the opposite. Captive rearing of exotic birds contributes nothing to conservation. Nearly 100 percent of captive breeding occurs outside of official conservation programs and is not based on natural selection. Since parrot survival skills and social behavior are determined by generations of evolution, interaction with the flock and environment, and passed on by parents to offspring, the probability of successfully releasing captive bred birds into a species’ habitat of origin—assuming that habitat is still intact—is extremely minimal. Moreover, the marketing of captive bred birds increases the demand for birds as “pets,” thus increasing the incentive for legal and illegal trapping of wild birds for sale to private individuals who wish keep them as “pets,” dealers/brokers seeking cheap “inventory,” and aviculturists seeking genetic diversity for breeding stock.

Parrots are highly intelligent and social animals. Many researchers equate their intellectual and emotional capabilities to that of a two- to five-year-old child, depending on the species. Parrots are sensitive creatures that have far more complex personalities, psycho-social needs, and physical care requirements than dogs and cats. However, the media and the pet industry often promote parrots as “low maintenance pets.” As with other exotic animals, people are fascinated by the idea of having a parrot as a “pet,” but few are prepared for the level of commitment or the demands of caring for a wild creature who may likely outlive them. The sad reality is that far too many parrots languish in abusive and/or neglectful environments. Avian shelter facilities have reported large numbers of neglected, abused, and abandoned birds entering their programs, with a marked increase in the percentage of younger birds being surrendered by their caretakers. Others are bounced from home to home or sent to breeding facilities to live out their reproductive lives. The fate of non-productive “breeders” who are not profitable is largely unknown since, at the present time, formalized studies regarding their disposition are not available. Only a few of these “retired” or non-productive birds are placed with adoption programs or sanctuaries. In the absence of further supporting data, we must assume that the rest are resold, warehoused, abandoned, deprived, destroyed, or simply kept by breeders to live out their lives.

There is an astounding lack of knowledge about parrots, the result being that many consumers and even animal advocacy organizations are often misinformed about the true nature of birds. Among the most popular myths and misconceptions about birds are: they are easy to care for (not true), only young or baby birds will “bond” with humans (definitely not true), and that buying a hand-raised bird will guarantee that it is tame/human-bonded (completely untrue). There has been little in the way of effective public education that recognizes birds as the intelligent, complex creatures they are and brings to light the plight of these magnificent creatures kept behind bars.

Captive parrots now present many of the same overpopulation problems of dogs and cats—too many birds and not enough qualified homes. Unfortunately, less than 100 parrot refuge organizations that are not affiliated with breeding facilities exist nationwide as compared to the thousands of rescue groups that take in dogs and cats. Public shelters have limited facilities and services, if any, to provide the special care required for homeless parrots. Many cannot accept birds at all. The result is that many birds will be subjected to unnecessary suffering and end up as a burden on the animal shelter systems. Even more tragic is that many parrots are destroyed simply because they are misunderstood by their guardians or there is no place for them to go and no one to care for them. This is a crisis we are facing now; without viable solutions the situation will only grow worse and many more lives will be lost.

The Complexities of Tackling the Problem

There are several factors that contribute to the difficulties and complexities inherent in addressing the overpopulation of parrots:

- “Hand-raised” birds are still undomesticated animals by nature. Many people question the ethics of keeping animals in our homes that are not physiologically and psychologically adapted to live anywhere but in the wild.
- Often, “hand-raised” chicks are sold unweaned to brokers, pet stores, or the consumer. An inexperienced individual attempting to hand-feed a chick often produces tragic results, including infection, crop burns, malnutrition, emotional/psychological/developmental conditions, or even death.
- There is a disturbing lack of sufficient knowledge to detect and control avian disease, particularly contagious disease in shelter situations. Some avian diseases are undetectable, incurable, and deadly, and there are few effective vaccines.
- Existing humane organizations and shelters are neither equipped nor prepared to handle displaced captive birds.
- Birds are often excluded from animal welfare legislation and existing animal cruelty statutes, making it often impossible to define neglect, substandard care, and abuse, or to effectively enforce any existing statutes.
- There is no regulation governing the breeding and sale of birds. “Aviculturists” have been unwilling to self-regulate and have opposed any and all proposed regulation. Large, substandard production parrot breeding facilities can often operate undetected by the public eye.
- Many parrot species are seriously endangered in the wild due to habitat destruction, poaching, hunting, and trapping for the pet trade. This, in turn, spurs captive breeding programs, which then further increases demand and makes importation and smuggling very profitable. Programs that introduce captive bred birds into the wild are largely

unsuccessful. By contrast, due to overproduction there is a huge surplus of certain parrot species in the pet trade and an increasing number are now ending up in sanctuaries and shelters throughout the U.S.

- “Companion” birds are often omitted from surveys and research quantifying the status of “pets” in homes, shelters, and breeding facilities. The conflicting results regarding captive birds in existing surveys have made it even more difficult to gain the attention of animal protection organizations that captive birds desperately need.

The Need for New Approaches to Avian Welfare

There is a distinct absence of public awareness in regard to this escalating tragedy. Unlike dogs and cats who are abandoned, unwanted birds are not visible as strays on the street—but they are becoming ever more visible in the skies. There has been a marked increase in feral flocks of quaker parrots, lovebirds, and budgerigars, as well as mixed species feral flocks that include conures, amazons, and macaws in scattered areas of the U.S. Although a serious problem clearly exists and the number of displaced captive birds is on the rise, it remains a hidden crisis of which the full ramifications for both the escaped exotic birds and native species have yet to be identified.

Mounting numbers of displaced captive birds are destined to become a multi-faceted issue that will affect everyone involved in animal welfare and the protection of wild birds in the U.S. and abroad. It is obvious that a more proactive working relationship between animal welfare/advocacy, avian welfare/advocacy, and conservation organizations is needed to enlighten the public and to work together for the protection and welfare of all wild birds. Efforts that promote public education, legislation, placement, and conservation must be developed and implemented for wild birds just as they have been for domestic pets and other wild animals.

Meeting the new challenges of avian welfare will require the enforcement and amendment of existing animal protection statutes, regulation of breeding and sales, international cooperation and conservation campaigns, and other initiatives that further benefit birds existing in opposing worlds: their native habitats of rainforests, grasslands, cliffs, and brush regions around the globe, and the breeding facilities, pet stores, zoos, and living rooms, where too many are condemned to exist while their wild cousins go extinct.

¹ *PIJAC Pet Industry Fact Sheet*, PIJAC, revised December 7, 1998

² <http://www.avma.org/membshp/marketstats/formulas.asp>, AVMA

³ *U.S. Pet Ownership & Demographics Sourcebook*, AVMA, 1997

⁴ *U.S. Pet Ownership & Demographics Sourcebook*, AVMA, 2002

⁵ *PIJAC Pet Industry Fact Sheet*, PIJAC, revised December 7, 1998 – Birds [Lifespan]: Parakeets 4–8 years, Cockatiels 12 years, Canaries 10 years, Lovebirds 12 years, Parrots 40+ years

⁶ Norris, Scott, “Sick As A Parrot,” *New Scientist Magazine*, Vol. 170, Issue 2294, June 9, 2001

Further Reading

Learn more about the issues impacting birds in captivity by reading our position statements and these recommended articles on the Avian Welfare Coalition web site: <http://www.avianwelfare.org/issues/>

Topics include: Keeping Parrots as “Pets.” Avicultural Ethics, Unwanted & Displaced Birds, Bird Sheltering, Rescue & Placement, Production Breeding & Mass-Marketing of Parrots for the Pet Trade, Sale of Unweaned Baby Birds, Wild-Caught Birds, Captive Breeding & Conservation, and Inhumane Veterinary & Avicultural Practice.