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The Hidden Face of Bird Abuse

By Denise Kelly

It was a long day for the humane officers on the scene: 89 dogs and 66 rabbits finally freed from their cramped, squalid cages now rested safely in carriers. The signs of malnutrition, prolonged neglect, and abuse were evident.

As the last animals were loaded onto the trucks, the officers took a final look around. With the bustle and barks now settling down, they heard the faint sounds of chirping and squawking. At first, they thought the sounds were coming from birds outside.

But officers soon discovered the locked basement. Breaking through the door amid the haze of dust and cobwebs, they were confronted with rows of feces-encrusted cages and breeding boxes filled with parrots and other exotic birds of all colors and sizes – 160 in all!

Alas, birds were not part of the original complaint. As is often the case, birds hidden in dark basements are not seen and frequently not heard.

The officers faced a quandary. They had to ask themselves: Are the birds in as bad a shape as the dogs and rabbits? Are there violations of the anti-cruelty laws? Do we need a warrant to remove the animals? And then there were the practical questions: How do we remove 160 terrified creatures ready to take flight and place them into carriers? And where do we put them once we get them to the shelter?

Where the Birds Are

It's not unusual for humane enforcement officers to come upon birds when investigating abuse and neglect cases involving other animals. Birds kept in dark areas of a home, such as closets and basements, are typically quieter, and not as visible to neighbors as barking dogs outside.



African grey in Nashville seizure case. Photo courtesy of Exotic Avian Sanctuary of Tennessee.



Before closing down, this breeding facility housed several hundred parrots. Photo courtesy of Foster Parrots.

In other cases, they are all too obvious. Disenchanted owners of parrots and other exotic birds often tire of the mess and noise these birds are capable of making. That's when many of them decide to house the birds in garages and sheds, or in outdoor enclosures. But instead of stopping the birds from vocalizing, it may increase it, often prompting complaints from neighbors. What's more, birds housed outdoors may not be adequately sheltered from extreme weather conditions and are vulnerable to predators. The harshest blow is dealt to those uncounted exotic birds intentionally released. Non-native birds do not possess the skills to survive in our environment.

Backyard and large-production breeders can also go undetected by the public eye, especially in rural areas. The lack of regulations governing the breeding and sale of birds at the federal and state levels opens the door for large-scale abuse.

In confiscations involving hoarders and breeders, the number of individual birds seized is typically greater than in those involving cats or dogs. One notable case in Houston numbered over 1,200 birds.

Because birds cannot be routinely spayed or neutered, they can proliferate pretty quickly, whether or

not the breeding is intentional. This is especially true among pairs of smaller species like parakeets, lovebirds and cockatiels.

Is It Bird Abuse?

It's easy to recognize the physical and environmental signs of neglect and abuse in most animals. You know it when you see it. Cruel treatment need not involve outright violence. Failing to provide animals with adequate shelter and a sufficient quantity of wholesome food and water, or to provide medical attention to any animal in protracted suffering, is generally evident to most people.

Humane professionals are generally familiar with the standards of care for domesticated animals such as dogs and cats, and a myriad of qualified resources are available to aid them in identifying cruel or substandard treatment of these animals.

But identifying the obvious – and less obvious – signs of suffering is much less clear-cut in a fundamentally undomesticated animal that is physically and mentally adapted to live in a flock in the wild and not in the average living room. There are hundreds of species of

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birds kept in U.S. homes, all with their own unique care needs. What constitutes a sufficient quantity of wholesome food or adequate shelter for a parakeet is vastly different from the needs of an African grey parrot.

The ways in which distress and suffering involving birds manifest themselves may be unfamiliar to police and prosecutors, and even to veterinarians and animal care and control and humane law enforcement officials. Moreover, officials may not recognize abuse in species with which they are unfamiliar. Birds suffer in ways not often recognized as mistreatment or neglect, though in fact it may violate laws already in force.

This dearth of information combined with a patchwork of legal protections that cover birds presents enor-

mous challenges to animal care and control professionals when evaluating cases of maltreatment as well as to their ability to pursue cases and to bring charges.

In some instances, there is a federal component most likely involving wildlife trafficking and the Endangered Species Act. Breeders of birds for the pet trade are technically subject to the federal Animal Welfare Act, but the U.S. Department of Agriculture has failed to promulgate standards.

Captive Bird Cruelty and Passive Neglect

It is often not possible to assess whether an animal is in distress based on behavior alone. The surrounding environment must also be considered in determining whether or not the animal needs help.



Conditions at hoarder/breeder home with 180 birds.



“Scarlet Macaws in the Wild” photo by Matt Terrey.

Like most humane-minded people, you’d be appalled if your neighbors kept their dog in a cage or tethered for weeks to a tree. In fact, your state’s anti-cruelty laws would likely agree. Nor would anyone claim that it’s acceptable to keep a dolphin in a backyard pool.

However, we often have a blind spot when it comes to recognizing that confining birds to a cage and without the company of other birds – in some cases 24/7 for years on end – is inhumane.

Birds are extremely social, and they are just as active and intelligent as dogs or cats. Some parrots have been compared to human toddlers in terms of their intelligence and their emotional needs. 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 with the flock, preening, mating, establishing nests, and raising their young.

By contrast, birds in captivity are routinely denied two of their most fundamental natural behaviors – flying and socialization. Denial of these activities can cause physical and behavioral abnormalities including aggression, incessant screaming, pacing, head-bobbing, feather-plucking, and even self-mutilation. Captive birds may also exhibit extremely passive behavior, even appearing

to be catatonic. This is not the sign of a well-adjusted bird; it’s the sign of a bird that has given up.

The vast majority of birds kept as pets also suffer malnutrition resulting from inadequate seed-only diets, and most are never taken to a veterinarian. Only 11% of bird-owning households seek veterinary advice for them.

It’s important to remember that they are also prey animals, easily stressed and highly vigilant in their environment. Birds can have adverse reactions to objects, noises, or sudden movements that would hardly raise a hair on a dog.

Sadly, these factors cause the vast majority of captive birds to live in conditions that fail to meet even their most basic physical and behavioral needs.

Changes in the captive environment (cage size, enrichment, socialization, diet) can help mitigate some of these quality-of-life issues. But such improvements depend on the caretaker having the sufficient will, knowledge, and resources to provide the specialized care the bird requires. Such a commitment could easily last 20 to 50 years or more, depending on the species.

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The fact is that the most prolonged suffering that captive birds experience is simply the result of sub-standard care practices that have been propagated by the pet trade for decades. Some of the long-standing traditions of the pet trade – caging, wing-clipping to restrict flight, and taking baby birds from their parents to be raised by humans so they'll be more easily tamed – were promoted largely to serve the convenience of caretakers and promote profits rather than to fulfill the true needs of birds.

Weighing the costs to birds, it's easy to conclude that, as with other nondomesticated animals, captivity in itself is an unsuitable environment.

How the Law Fails Birds

Most people are surprised to learn that parrots, as well as other exotic birds commonly sold in the pet trade or used for entertainment purposes, are not included in the regulations of the federal Animal Welfare Act. However, a number of lawsuits against the USDA have challenged this omission.

Birds are also frequently excluded from animal welfare legislation, pet shop regulations, and existing animal cruelty statutes at the state and local levels. Only 12 states require breeders to possess a license or documentation to breed, import, export, sell, or trade birds in the parrot family. These regulations are motivated predominantly by human health and safety concerns and do not define or mandate humane care standards applicable to bird breeders or dealers. Only five states have specific language defining housing requirements for birds that apply to pet shops.

Moreover, there is essentially no seller accountability for birds sold on the internet and in temporary sales venues such as flea markets, swap meets, auctions, and other unregulated venues. Animals sold at transient venues are frequently kept in crowded, unsanitary conditions, often going without food and/or water in extreme temperatures for extended periods of time.

The demand for birds as pets also drives the smuggling of parrots for the illegal and legal pet trade. Captive-bred birds are physically identical to their wild counterparts. The presence of captive-bred birds in the trade actually provides a perfect cover for smuggled birds despite U.S. and international trade restrictions.

Until such time as society's attitude toward the keeping of birds in captivity changes and the law begins to reflect their true needs, the job of protecting them from harm lies with the humane community.

Drawing upon the expert skills that animal care and control and humane law enforcement professionals



Self-mutilating cockatoo

already bring to their daily work to evaluate and remedy abuses involving other animals will be the crucial step to helping our avian friends in distress.

Helpful Resources for Animal Control and Humane Law Enforcement

Describing the various care needs of birds and identifying signs of poor care and substandard living conditions would take many pages! The Avian Welfare Coalition has developed several initiatives to support animal shelters and law enforcement professionals in their efforts. Our webinars are bird-specific and cover direct care, housing, and medical protocols as well as topics related to bird placement, estate planning, avian law, and advocacy.

Our brochure, "Evaluating Neglect, Abuse, Suffering, and Illness in Parrots and Other Captive Exotic Birds," serves as a guide for humane enforcement officers and is available for download on our website at: bit.ly/EvCapBirds

Our Avian Shelter Outreach Program is designed to aid the animal sheltering community on the care of exotic birds within a short-term shelter setting. This includes 16 FREE downloadable "How-To" Guides and an Avian Webinar Series developed in partnership with the Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries and Anthony Pilny, DVM, DABVP.

"How-To" Guides: www.avianwelfare.org/shelters

Webinars: www.avianwelfare.org/webinars

Shelter Resource Center: www.avianwelfare.org/shelter_outreach.htm

Last Word

We have an ethical responsibility to provide the best care possible for all animals living in captivity. Captive birds deserve the same efforts to promote public education, protective legislation, sheltering, and placement afforded to domestic pets and other wild creatures.

At the same time, we must step up legal protections and conservation efforts that will keep them flying in the skies of their native homelands as freely as our own native birds do in theirs.

Denise Kelly is president and co-founder of the Avian Welfare Coalition (www.avianwelfare.org), formed in 2000 to raise awareness of the plight of captive birds and to serve as an educational resource for the animal protection community, lawmakers, and the general public. ❖



Cockatiel with a severely overgrown beak.

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