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LEFT: Chio, a wild red lored Amazon in Costa Rica. **RIGHT:** Bugsy, a blue and gold macaw. *Photographs by Tom Murray (Left) and Brian Jones (Right)*

H A N G I N G I N T H E B A L A N C E

The Captive Parrot Story

by Karen Windsor

Executive Director, Foster Parrots, Ltd.

In the Wild, the sun is just beginning to dip below the line of trees surrounding our compound in Costa Rica, and the *red lored Amazons* are starting to congregate. They fly in pairs and in small groups of 3 or 5, coming from the fields and forests where they've spent their day foraging, dining on fruits and flowers in season, playing or napping through the heavy afternoon heat. During the day hours they're widely scattered throughout the region, but now as late day shadows begin to deepen, the trees are gathering hundreds of quarreling, calling, rejoicing parrots. Whether it's a certain color of dusk or position of the setting sun or a vocal cue somehow recognized by all over the cacophony of their concert, suddenly hundreds of *Amazons* take to the sky, setting out toward the nearby town, Puerto Jimenez. There they will clamor for their final nighttime roosting spots in the trees above the quaint restaurants that line the beach.

On the Osa Peninsula in Costa Rica this is the natural society of wild *red lored Amazons* as they prepare for the end of their day, pulling their numbers together for safety during the long night. And while these parrots typically spend their daylight hours widely scattered, they live their lives in their native range as a part of a multi-species community

that supports their understanding of and survival in the natural world. Here the fields and the forests pulse with the songs and sounds of insects and amphibians, of hundreds of species of songbirds, parrots, raptors and scavengers, and of the resonant calls, grunts and growls of mammals and primates... it's a living tapestry of animal cultures and a web of interconnected communication woven together in a fabric that supports each animal's position and purpose within it's own society – and its survival in the wild where multi-lingual cues alert all to the presence of predators, the possibility of danger, opportunities to mate and finding food.

Millions of years of evolution have prepared parrots for life in this world. A few decades of commercial production cannot even begin to prepare them for lives in *our* world.

At the New England Exotic Wildlife Sanctuary, the permanent care sanctuary facility of Foster Parrots, Ltd, nearly 400 parrots reside. We log an average of 300 – 600 requests for the surrender of parrots annually, and these numbers are echoed by rescue organizations across the country as we struggle collectively to catch the fall-out from the commercial trade in parrots. Many of these birds carry psychological scars etched by the trauma of capture from the wild, or exhibit behavioral issues typical of wild animals

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hand-raised by humans as “pets”. Even under the best of circumstances it is difficult to locate homes capable of meeting the needs of an animal as intelligent and socially needy as a parrot. Complicate that relationship with issues of aggression, psychological manifestations of stress like feather plucking or self-mutilation, and vocal expressions that can literally damage human eardrums... Clearly, we are faced with a challenging proposition as we search for answers to an ever-expanding unwanted parrot problem.

The enormous volume of unwanted parrots being fielded by the rescue community indicates an epidemic failure of parrots as pets. But whose failure is it, really? We’ve done everything in our power to manipulate parrots and to alter and change them to fit better into our lives. We clip their wings and confine them to cages. We remove them from their families and from their flocks and instead try to fit them into ours. We reject their language and expect them to recite our words. We genetically alter their colors and the contours of their feathers to create designer birds. We render them utterly dependent upon us and then, when we find we cannot entirely eradicate the true nature of the animal, we abandon them. Some of these parrots will find their way to a sanctuary or rescue organization. Millions will not.

Beverly Lewis (primary cockatoo steward at NEEWS) pushes her cart full of *Moluccan cockatoos* down the aisle in front of the series of large aviaries we refer to as “Cockatoo Row”. Forty cockatoos reside permanently at the NEEWS and most of them live in these tenuously compatible aviaries where only our most highly trained staff and volunteers are able to work. Cockatoos are smart. They size up their human care givers, seek out weakness or trepidation and delight in games of manipulating or dominating their custodians. Beverly, at the age of 63, has been our primary cockatoo steward for over 10 years and has a special rapport with these, the most difficult of all parrot species kept as companions. They wait for her and anticipate their turn to ride on her food cart. They are positively delighted when tours are being conducted and they have the opportunity to entertain – and sometimes intimidate - groups of new and interesting people with their physical displays and their ear-splitting, acrobatic vocalizations.

“That’s Henry.” Beverly says. “He’s in a mood today. He was being very fresh to Bebe this morning and I had to give him a good talking to, so now he’s pouting.” One has to smile at the notion that a woman and a parrot can communicate on this level, but in fact it is true. Beverly and her cockatoos are uncannily in-tuned to one another. They mind her. And part of the success of their relationship lies in the fact that Beverly understands their behavior is not arbitrary. Actually, it is very “human”. They feel joy and delight and anger and jealousy. They get mad. They can feel frustration. They can also feel deep loyalty and love.

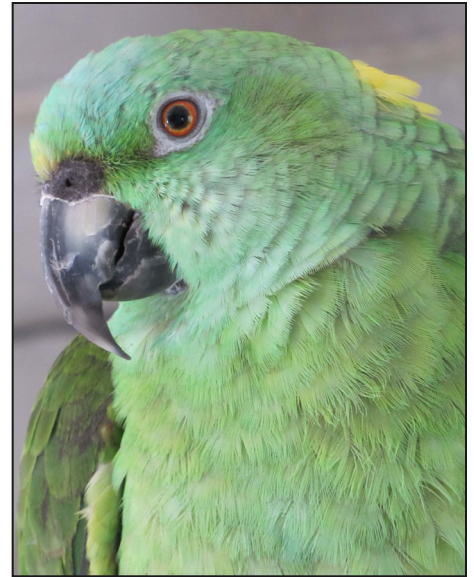


Photographs provided by Foster Parrots Ltd.
TOP: Beverly Lewis and her cart of cockatoos. **BOTTOM:** Moluccan cockatoos in an outdoor aviary at the NEEWS.

When they bite it is not a mindless act. They are trying to express something. They rarely bite Beverly. The unusual connection they share denotes a communication that transcends mere words.

All of these cockatoos crave human attention and long to be a part of a human family; not a single one of them has any chance of ever successfully living as anyone’s “pet”. Their vocalizations reach impossible decibels and they are capable of extreme and unpredictable aggression. They have an insatiable hunger for social interaction and they are psychologically and emotionally vulnerable to the extent that self-destructive behaviors like feather-plucking or self-mutilation are almost commonplace amongst Moluccan and Umbrella cockatoos in captivity. Generally speaking, few people are capable of meeting the needs of a cockatoo over the long term.

At NEEWS we have set our responsibility to meet the individual needs of all of our resident birds, and the difficulty of that cannot be over stated. Some parrots, particularly those who were wild-caught or who otherwise have emerged with their species identification intact, are able to transition back into avian society and establish bonds with other birds. This removes humans from the equation and



LEFT: Green winged macaws in an aviary at the NEEWS. **RIGHT:** Female yellow naped Amazon. Photographs by Brian Jones (Left) and Foster Parrots Ltd (Right)

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it is what we hope for for all of our sanctuary residents. But even under the best of circumstances, avian social dynamics are complicated, and orchestrating compatible communities of parrots is tricky. There are rituals of initiation practiced by birds in the wild, and hierarchies and exchanges of information about social rank and lineage that we can never understand. Most importantly, in the wild there is limitless space into which a parrot can retreat when conflicts arise. There's no way to escape confrontation in a 25 x 15 aviary. And the dynamics of an aviary can change seasonally, or with the addition or removal of a single flock member. As such, we must observe the birds continually for changes in behavior or social structure that can mean life or death for birds in a community setting.

Many people contact Foster Parrots Ltd believing their birds need to be with other birds in a flock situation, but the truth is that parrots who have been hand raised by humans very often identify themselves as human and are unable to relate to other birds. Our biggest challenge in the sanctuary setting are those birds who continue to require a high degree of human social support. Thirty-five to forty volunteers and a staff of eight people at the NEEWS struggle to

divide their time between hundreds of parrots vying for attention.

To say that parrots are wild animals is to present only a part of the story. These birds may be ruled by all of the hard-wired behaviors and drives of their wild ancestors, but they have been deeply impacted by socialization and by their relationships with humans. Whether they regard us as their mates, their enemies, their family or their gods... whether the ties that bind us are rooted in irrevocable love or psychological trauma, parrots in captivity suffer the weight of human-avian relationship and have been changed by it.

Working to meet the complex needs of hundreds of parrots in a sanctuary setting, we look toward the natural behavior of parrots in the wild to give us clues in regards to environmental enrichment, social structure and quality of life in sanctuary. Just like in our homes, however, the sanctuary setting represents a profoundly abnormal environment for parrots. Natural behavior is skewed, not only by the physical limitations of captivity but also by the indelible imprint of human socialization on these psychologically complex animals. Parrots hang in the balance between who they were evolved to be and what we have tried to mold them into. We now must acknowledge

the damage that's been done and take responsibility for the tragic end result of our fascination with these beautiful, intelligent and profoundly complicated creatures. Sanctuary is one answer, but it is not the only answer and it cannot work for every bird. In many ways it is evidence of our failure as guardians to parrots.

Foster Parrots, Ltd. is a non-profit organization dedicated to the rescue and protection of unwanted and abused companion parrots and other displaced captive exotic animals. Working on many levels to bring critical services to birds and animals in transition, we offer life-long sanctuary care for unadoptable parrots and other exotics at our permanent care sanctuary facility, The New England Exotic Wildlife Sanctuary, and provide adoption services for well-socialized parrots who desire human companionship. Our conservation work in Central and South America helps keep parrots and other animals safe in their natural habitat, and also embodies our ultimate message: *Parrots are worth more in the trees than in cages; parrots and all wild animals should be free.*

For more information about Foster Parrots Ltd, The New England Exotic Wildlife Sanctuary, our education programs, student internships and/or make a donation, please go to: www.fosterparrots.com