

**Birds of a Feather: Avian husbandry, Medicine, and Behavior in the Shelter
Workshop V27**

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To many the role of the avian veterinarian is exclusively that of diagnosing disease and applying medical or surgical remedies. The career path of a veterinarian, especially one geared to companion animal medicine, is usually centered on understanding organ system function in health and disease. These days, however, choosing to practice avian or exotic animal medicine involves opening up a Pandora's box of ethical issues. The challenges of addressing these ethical considerations can either inspire or dishearten.

Biologists have documented many complicated trends that have resulted in habitat destruction and species extinction in the tropical forests of our planet. Looking back at the chain of events that has brought so many psittacine species to the verge of extinction, makes one wonder why we didn't see it coming. Human population growth, agricultural pesticide usage, timber harvesting and the drive for economic development have seriously impacted many species of plants and animals. These factors have resulted in irreparable harm for many plants, animals, and insects.

We would certainly have enough to worry about if these were the primary forces leveraged against psittacine populations. Unfortunately, these powerful forces pale in comparison to the insatiable pet trade that has developed since the 1960's. It must have been thoughtless sense of abundance and greed that lead to the unrestrained harvesting of parrots from the wild into the pet trade. Reviewing the numbers makes for sobering reflection. In a five-year period from 1981-1985 more than 1.8 million parrots legally entered the pet trade. Over 703,000 were neo-tropical psittacines imported into the United States. By some estimates as many bird died in the process of capture and transport as reached retail outlets. The Wild Bird Conservation Act of 1992 dramatically changed the pet trade in the United States by virtually stopping the importation of wild caught parrots for the pet trade. But unfortunately the importation of wild caught parrots into Europe, UK, Canada and Asia, to which two million birds were imported from 1990-1994 alone continues unchecked.

Currently at least 30% of the 140 parrot species found in the Western Hemisphere are threatened with extinction. Of the 330 parrot species worldwide, 28% are considered threatened. The recently published Parrot Action Plan, the work of the Species Survival Commission working under the auspices of the IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources), addresses the immediate threat to 95 species. The cumulative effect of habitat destruction and the pet trade has resulted in psittacine species being one of the most endangered groups of birds. The end results demand more than sober reflection; they should inspire panic.

Fast forward to 2001, where insult has been added to injury. The insult that many individuals are recognizing and wrestling with is the growing number of unwanted parrots. After years of record sales of both live birds and related products, statistics reflect alarming trends in pet parrot ownership. PIJAC, the Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council, estimates the number of pet parrots in the United States to be between 3 and 5 million. They also estimate that the average parrot will have seven homes in its lifetime. With an estimated 85% of bird purchases made on impulse, most parrots are sold to owners completely unaware of the challenges of parrot ownership. Whereas some people have dismissed parrot rescue as an "issue du jour", the waiting lists at established rescue organizations and sanctuaries speaks to a real and growing problem.

Many of us have found a huge disconnect between commonly held attitudes about pet birds and reality. Most people who purchase parrots think their new pet is going to be easy to live with. Many parrots are sold as babies, when like juveniles of many species, they are cute, cuddly and very benign. The first few months are typically easy. As the bird matures into its adult parrot ways however, owners are often in shock as they observe their parrot screaming, chewing up their treasures, chasing their kids and exhibiting unpredictable behavior. There is often a complete lack of understanding that the parrot in their living room is a captive wild animal. We find unthinkable the notion of having captive bears, tigers or even raccoons, but have built an industry around putting parrots in peoples' living rooms.

With this perspective in mind, the challenge becomes how to do effective damage control. Reports from across the country reflect an increasing problem as humane shelters see more surrendered pet birds. Developing an effective response will involve a blend of medical, management, and educational approaches. As many traditions of companion bird care fail to provide adequate care, it is common for birds to develop degenerative health conditions over time. These conditions, largely the result of malnutrition, can present as specific diseases or vague "failure to thrive" conditions. Correcting the errors of management and nutrition are often more imperative than diagnosing specific conditions. Despite their reputation as being fragile creatures, parrots have demonstrated an ability to adapt and survive in many conditions. As most pet parrots have little contact with other psittacines, the risk of infectious disease is fairly low. The notable exceptions to this are several devastating viruses that can develop slowly over time. Several common companion parrots are reservoir hosts for *Chlamydia psittaci*. As this disease remains a reportable disease and human health risk, testing is always a good idea. Education becomes the real challenge if the cycle of revolving door homes is to change. Educating prospective owners requires understanding the commonly held misconceptions about parrot care and developing an awareness of the different needs of the many species of psittacines kept as companion birds.